REBORN AS A
SPACE MERCENARY
I WOKE UP PILOTING THE STRONGEST STARSHIP!
NOVEL
1
WRITTEN BY
Ryuto
ILLUSTRATED BY
Tetsuhiro Nabeshima

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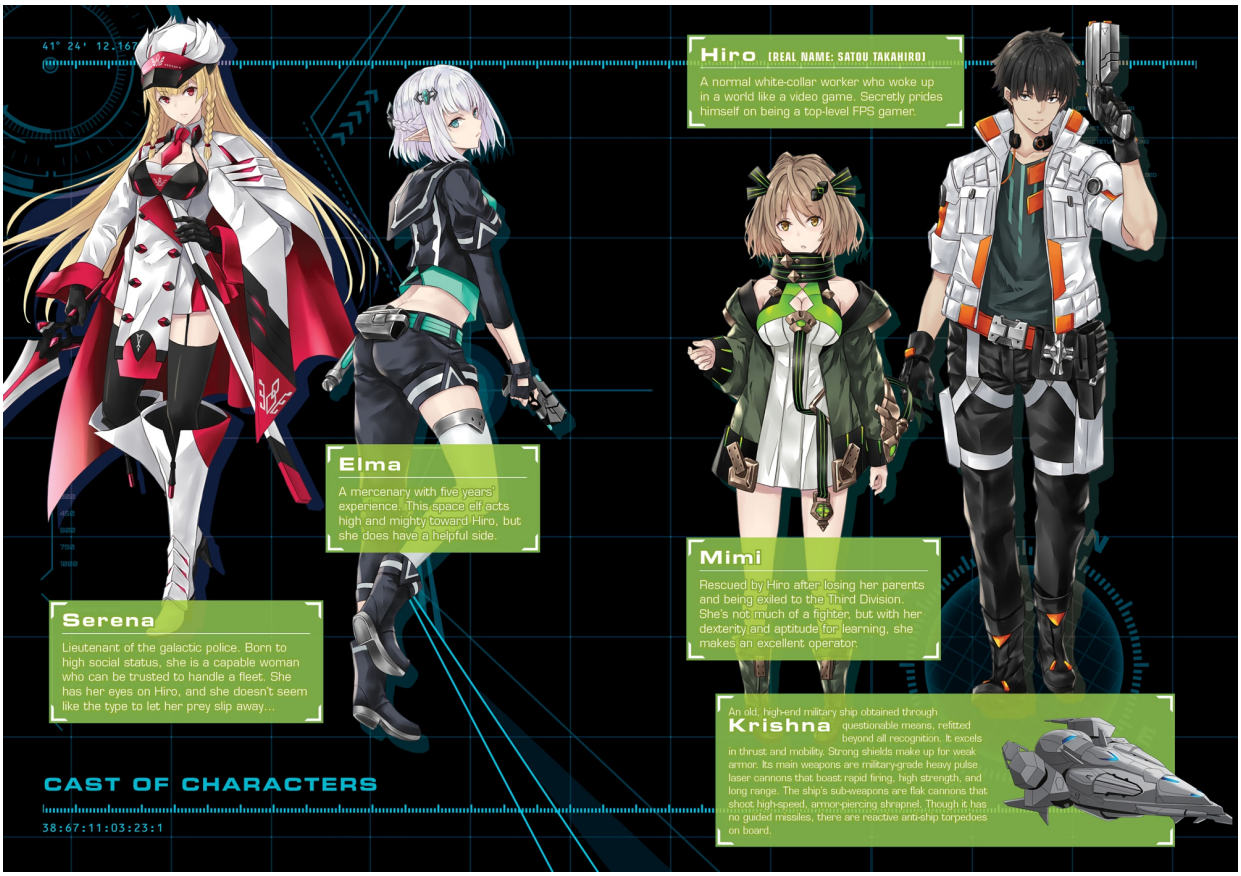
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Hiro (REAL NAME: SATOU TAKAHIRO)
A normal white-collar worker who woke up in a world like a video game. Secretly prides himself on being a top-level FPS gamer.
Elma
A mercenary with five years' experience. This space elf acts high and mighty toward Hiro, but she does have a helpful side.
Serena
Lieutenant of the galactic police. Born to high social status, she is a capable woman who can be trusted to handle a fleet. She has her eyes on Hiro, and she doesn't seem like the type to let her prey slip away...
Mimi
Rescued by Hiro after losing her parents and being exiled to the Third Division. She's not much of a fighter, but with her dexterity and aptitude for learning, she makes an excellent operator.
An old, high-end military ship obtained through questionable means, refitted beyond all recognition. It excels in thrust and mobility. Strong shields make up for weak armor. Its main weapons are military-grade heavy pulse laser cannons that boast rapid firing, high strength, and long range. The ship's sub-weapons are flak cannons that shoot high-speed, armor-piercing shrapnel. Though it has no guided missiles, there are reactive anti-ship torpedoes on board.
Krishna
CAST OF CHARACTERS
38:67:11:03:23:1

We'd come here, to Tarmein Prime's Resident Administration Bureau Third Division branch, to make formal preparations for Mimi to join my crew.
"I hear mercenary work pays well, but surely 500,000 Ener is too much for you to pay. I assume there are plenty of places in the Third Division for you to satisfy yourself. Why not do that, instead of trying to frolic beyond your means?"
Oh? Is that how we're gonna do this?
"Please...I'll do anything. Just let me live with you on your ship."
Despite the man's insinuations, I wasn't trying to drag Mimi off for whatever dirty crap he had in mind. But if he wanted to play it this way and look down on me, fine, I was willing to play his sick game just to call his bluff.
"I can pay off that pocket change right now, if you want."
"Excuse me?"
The official blinked rapidly, taken aback by my suggestion. Nice. That's exactly the reaction I was hoping for.

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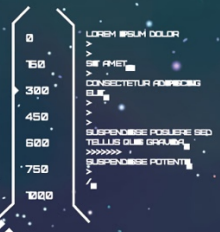

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I WOKE UP PILOTING THE STRONGEST STARSHIP!

NOVEL 1

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Airship

Seven Seas Entertainment

MEZAMETARA SAIKYO SOBI TO UCHUSEN MOCHI DATTA NODE,
IKKODATE MEZASHITE YOHEI TOSHITE JIYU NI IKITAI Vol.1
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Prologue

COLD JOLTED ME awake.

Dark, freezing cold.

Where was I? A sea of magnificent stars swirled before me, vast and incomprehensible. I'd never witnessed such a sight in all my life.

"What in the world?" I mused.

Stars, nebulas, even clusters of asteroids—they wound through the heavens, so close I could almost reach out and touch them. But how could that be? No vantage point on Earth allowed a view like this. Somehow, I could see asteroids with nothing but the naked eye. This was like something out of a movie or video game.

"Am I dreaming? But this cold…" The chill piercing right down into my bones was too real to deny, as was the anxiety churning in my stomach. "Where even am I?"

I couldn't make out much beyond the dazzling celestial display before me. It felt like I was somewhere small, somewhere confined. A belt or strap of some sort kept me tethered to a chair. That sent a bolt of panic through the anxiety. Was I being detained in some way? What the heck was going on?! I panicked, jerking in the chair until my eyes finally adjusted to the darkness.

"This is…" There was something familiar about this place. I had seen this room—no, this *cockpit*—before. "This is the cockpit of that ship from my video game, the Krishna. Am I dreaming?"

I searched for a more reasonable explanation, but everything about the space around me screamed that this really was the cockpit of my beloved spaceship Krishna from *Stella Online*.

The mixture of online action and soft sci-fi flavor in *Stella Online* had kept me hooked for years now. On top of that, the game offered players unparalleled freedom to adventure through a vast universe. Nowhere else could you navigate battlefields as a mercenary, participate in trade as the

owner of a container ship, or embark on just about any other adventure you could imagine. The sky was decidedly *not* the limit in this game; every player got to invent their own style and play in their own way.

I played as a standard mercenary and started off mostly doing random odd jobs like pack-muling so I could save up to buy a ship built for battle. Once I obtained a powerful enough ship, I went right back to mercenary work, until I could afford the *next* ship, and so on.

My current love, the Krishna, was a state-of-the-art machine that I obtained from an in-game event a few months back. The ASX-08 Krishna stood out even in a game with dozens and dozens of ships to choose from. It combined the maneuverability of a small craft with the firepower of a heavy cruiser. My Krishna could even take on a battleship.

"But dang, it's cold," I said. I used the touchscreen control panel to activate the main generator and bring life support systems back online. Warm air rushed into the cockpit. The system's status screen showed oxygen levels rising after dipping terrifyingly low. The temperature, which had started just below –5° Celsius, also ticked upward.

"Phew, that was close. If I hadn't woken up, I would have suffocated." Crisis (narrowly) averted.

I seriously don't get what's going on here. I crossed my arms and surveyed the now-lit-and-warming cockpit. No matter how many times I blinked or pinched myself, the truth remained clear—this was definitely, absolutely, undoubtedly the cockpit of my beloved spaceship from *Stella Online*.

Dreaming of the game I obsessed over was one thing. If you played horror games enough, you started having nightmares. If you played sword-and-sorcery RPGs, suddenly you dreamed of being the hero yourself. Most gamers could relate. But this was on a whole 'nother level.

"So, what? Is this a lucid dream or something?" I'd heard of lucid dreams before, dreams so intense and real you *knew* you were dreaming. But from what I remembered, people woke up the second they understood what was happening—and I sure wasn't waking up. Worse, the gradually rising temperature of the cockpit felt way too real and tangible to be part of a dream.

“Hmm.” I searched for an explanation but came up empty. I even slapped my cheeks, but all it did was sting a little. Was this really not a dream?

Nuh-uh. No way. That couldn’t be.

“The controls are surprisingly simple,” I said. Out of other ideas, I tried piloting the Krishna. The control column and foot pedals confused me at first, but once I visualized them like a keyboard and mouse, it clicked into place. Now that I understood the machine, I could even make precise movements.

“Still not waking up yet, huh?”

I accelerated and decelerated repeatedly. Each time, I’d sink back into the seat, then jolt forward into the seatbelt. Even that wasn’t enough to wake me up, though.

“Okay, fine. Daddy’s gonna fire off some weapons, then!” Maybe I was going crazy. Maybe I’d just lost any hope of waking up. Either way, I brought the weapons systems online and activated the armaments. The ship changed shape around me, revealing four weapon arms. Powerful, military-standard heavy pulse lasers extended from the hull. These were the strongest of the heavy laser weapons in *Stella Online*—and I had *four* of them!

Two gun barrels also jutted from the sides of the cockpit. These “flake cannons,” as they were called in the game, operated like shotguns with spread fire. That kind of firepower made them the superior point-blank weapon as far as I was concerned. Most small craft would explode after just two shots.

I had one more ace up my sleeve, but now wasn’t the time to test-fire it. The ammo cost was *exorbitant*.

“Fire in the hooole!” I let loose on a nearby asteroid with four heavy pulse lasers. “Whoa?!” Four green beams of light shot straight toward their targets, obliterating the asteroid in a single volley. Fragments of the asteroid scattered in all directions, pinging against the Krishna’s shields. With each impact, the shields flickered.

“That was stronger than I expected,” I said in amazement. *This* was the true power of the heavy pulse laser, a weapon that could melt a

battleship's shields in an instant and totally wreck the ship itself. It was no joke…and speaking of jokes, at this point, there was no more laughing this off.

I had to face reality: "This isn't a dream. It's real."

Chapter 1:
First Blood

REAL. This was actually real.

That posed a problem.

Why was this happening to me? I couldn't think of a single good reason, yet here I was.

"What'd I do yesterday?" I wondered. I went to work as usual. I came home from work as usual, ate dinner as usual, showered, gamed for a while, and went to bed—as usual. None of the clichés held true. There were no weird messages creepily appearing on my computer screen, no trucks decking me to transport me to another world. It was just a regular day—well, aside from this.

"Completely bizarre," I complained. But complaining wasn't going to do me any good. Gotta be positive. If this was real life, then I had somehow made my way into *Stella Online*, and I just had to accept it. Did that mean I could live the mercenary life I enjoyed in the game? Bound by no obligations, rising up in the universe by my own strength. Yeah, that sounded great. It was a hundred times better than being stuck in a network administration job with no hope of advancement. Besides, I could make use of my specialties here.

Nice. Suddenly, I was in a much better mood. *If I'm stuck here, I might as well enjoy it. Yeah, that sounds good to me!* I still had a few concerns, but there was no sense dwelling on them if I was stuck either way.

With that settled, I had to figure out where the heck I was. The Galaxy Map should have confirmed my current location, but when I opened it, all I got were the words "NO DATA" in huge, heartless letters.

Well, that wasn't good. The vast frontier of this universe presented a major navigational hurdle. I couldn't just wander around blindly and hope things worked out. In the four years since *Stella Online* launched, no one had managed to reach the center of the galaxy. I couldn't be sure this place

was identical to the game, but I had to assume it was close, which meant it was *massive*.

I gave up on ascertaining my current location and checked on the status of my ship. I didn't have a bounty set on me; that was a relief. At least I wouldn't have to worry about getting caught by the galactic police and sent to jail right off the bat.

Next up was checking on my affiliation and belongings. It looked like I was nothing special, just an ordinary guy. I didn't even belong to a mercenary guild. My name hadn't changed from when I played *Stella Online*, though.

Meanwhile, my current funds stood at a whopping zero Ener. Seriously? I was broke?! What about all the money I saved up while playing? My heart dropped as I went to check the ship's cargo, my last hope.

It looked like I had a small amount of food and water stored among the ship's cargo. How considerate of…whoever prepared all this. I didn't have the faintest idea who my anonymous benefactor might be, but at least I wouldn't starve.

Apart from the food, I had a small cache of flak ammunition and two spare energy packs.

"Rare Metal too, huh? And quite a lot of it. That's pretty sick." The universe of *Stella Online* had abandoned paper and coin currency long ago. Everyone now used a digital currency called Ener. Not only did this make transactions easier and more convenient, it also left an electronic record of every interaction.

One of the best ways to get Ener was Rare Metal, a scarce but necessary commodity throughout the galaxy. Finding Rare Metal was like digging up silver or gold back on Earth—precious, in small supply, and valuable just about anywhere.

Space pirates and others who preferred to stay off the books especially loved Rare Metal. It was a physical good, which made it harder to track than electronic currency. Of course, this meant that cruising around with a ship full of Rare Metal made you a tasty target for pirate NPCs and

other less savory sorts out there in the universe. In game terms, those NPC encounters would get much more frequent if you had Rare Metal on board.

"Warning! A vessel of unknown affiliation is scanning this craft," the support AI blared.

"That didn't take long," I said. Being scanned by another craft didn't necessarily mean I was being targeted by space pirates. *Maybe there's an issue with the ship's frame?* It was entirely possible the scan came from a benevolent third party just trying to help.

The far more likely possibility was that I simply looked suspicious as heck.

Why would a ship carrying so much metal—something used for anonymous transactions—be parked in an empty sector of space? It was just too sketchy. It would be completely reasonable to believe I was here to make illegal bargains with space pirates.

"A vessel of unknown affiliation has brought its weapons systems online," the support AI droned. Welp, it looked like the goddess of fortune would not smile upon me today. I didn't have a bounty, so those weapons had to be space pirates.

"Hey, bro. Whatcha doin' out here? Funny place to take a nap." I didn't recognize the voice that crackled over the intercoms.

"Ha ha ha! Nothing in particular. Don't mind me," I replied.

"Heh heh heh. Don't be like that, bro. Here we are, meetin' each other by chance out in space. Say, how 'bout you let me have some of your cargo? Then I might let ya off without any funny business."

"I'll have to refuse, but I'd be happy to sell it to you for a reasonable price."

As we spoke, two more unidentified ships left faster-than-light travel with loud bangs. All three of them activated their weapons systems and prepared to fire.

The new ships showed up as models on my display. Their builds were a mess. The haphazard frames bore sloppily installed weapons that hardly looked ready for battle. Their hulls each had different cargo sizes. The

frames, the weapons, everything about them was completely uncoordinated. In stereotypical space pirate fashion, dents and scratches marred the ships.

"Heh. Ain't never seen a ship like that before. Who d'ya belong to, buddy?" their leader asked.

"No comment." I scanned the unidentified, jet-black ships. Each one held somewhere between 5,000 and 8,000 Ener.

"Heh heh heh. So you're checkin' us out too, huh? Guess we can't help that. Hand over the cargo, buddy, and we'll spare yer life."

"Oh, all right. I suppose I have no choice." Steeling my resolve, I carefully raised main generator output from normal to battle-ready. I took a breath. I might really have to kill fellow humans to get out of this, but the Rare Metal in my ship could mean the difference between life and death for me. Without money, I wasn't going to last long out here. If someone wanted to fight me for it, then I had to protect myself. Even if that meant crushing these space pirates.

"That's enough, buddy. Don't wanna die, do ya?"

"Of course not."

There was no question about what would happen to someone who lost their cradle—their spaceship—in outer space. Though they would probably die in the explosion long before suffocating.

Maybe I should have been afraid, but as I prepared to fight for my life, I felt oddly calm. Perhaps that was because my vessel was the Krishna.

The pirates' ships were simple, balanced ships made for civilian use, nothing close to my Krishna. Worse, the models were several generations old and worn from use. Their main generator outputs, shield strength, and weapons were pitifully weak by comparison to mine. They probably neglected proper maintenance, leaving the ships' plating all out of shape.

As for me, my Krishna was built for hardcore military use, and I'd customized it perfectly to my liking, making it the ideal personal battleship.

My shield and weapons strength far surpassed their shabby ships, and a military-grade sturdy hull protected me from their pathetic attacks. Quite frankly, defeat was inconceivable. This wasn't going to be a fight; it was going to be a one-sided hunt. A curb-stomp.

I flipped my rising generator output to max level all at once and said, “I don’t wanna die, so I’m gonna fight back. Just so you know, this probably ends with you guys dying. Don’t blame me.”

“That’s big talk for someone facing three ships at once. You’re gonna regret this, buddy!” The space pirate ships that were circling swiveled to aim at me.

In that instant, I launched the Krishna forward full throttle.

“Wargh!”

“Wha?! He’s fast!”

The sudden g-force threw me back against my seat, but I managed to use the touchscreen to get my weapons online. Four weapon arms equipped with heavy lasers extended from the Krishna, while the weapons bays on either side of the cockpit deployed two flak cannons. I activated the sub-boosters and banked into a 180-degree turn, maintaining my momentum as I pointed the four heavy lasers at one of the space pirates’ ships.

“It changed shape!” one of the pirates screamed.

The continuous fire of my military-grade heavy pulse lasers easily tore through the ship’s shield, vaporizing its hull with small explosions. The lasers kept on burning, cutting right through the cockpit.

“All that with one shot?!”

I hit the throttle again, chasing after a ship trying to escape. The drag of the g-force made my vision go dark. Almost soothed by the sensation, I once again activated my heavy lasers.

“N-no, I don’t wanna die! I don’t wanna die, I don’t—” The volley of pulse lasers pierced mercilessly through his shield and stabbed the ship’s main booster as the pirate begged for his life. The lasers must have burned right through to the main generator; the second ship exploded in a burst of fiery light.

“Dammiiit! I’ll kill you!” The third pirate chose to fight instead of fly. Maybe the sight of his friends’ demise left him yearning for revenge. He readied his laser cannons. Once he started firing, avoiding the speed-of-light ammo would be next to impossible. I didn’t have many options open

to me. All I could really do was dodge around erratically and hope that made it harder for him to target me.

"Gngh?! Urk…!"

I switched between rapid acceleration and sudden stops, trying to move the Krishna as unpredictably as possible. The jerky motions turned my stomach and left me nauseous.

"Grrr, how do you move like that?!"

The space pirate steadied his aim. That was certainly a change from the game. This couldn't be a dream; the space pirates reacted like thinking, reasoning humans, just like me. The nausea intensified. Maybe it affected my maneuvering or maybe the space pirate's aim simply outshone my evasive maneuvers. Either way, the pirate finally landed a shot on the Krishna.

"I-It didn't work?!" The pirate growled with frustration and surprise. The Krishna's shield blocked his laser completely, leaving me unscathed.

I think that's enough.

I accelerated toward the pirate ship facing me. We dashed recklessly at each other, like a game of chicken. He got off a few more desperate shots, but his panic made him sloppy and sent his fire wide. Even when he managed to hit me, the Krishna's shield rendered the attacks harmless.

"S-stop! Mommy—!"

I dodged the space pirate's ship an instant before we would have collided, firing flak at him as I veered away. The high-speed shots saturated his shield, tore through it, and blasted through the hull of his ship. By the time the flak burst free, his ship looked more like metallic Swiss cheese than any kind of space craft.

"Hargh! Haah, haah…" I banked through a tight turn, wheeling around to watch the ship explode. My breath rasped through the cockpit. I returned the generator output to normal levels and, finally, took the weapons system offline.

The nausea subsided when the ship stilled and the g-forces relented. It wasn't nervous nausea. Now that I'd stopped, now that it was over, I felt strangely calm.

“If that didn’t wake me up, this has gotta be real.” I shook myself. I’d survived. I’d *more than* survived. I took down three pirates bent on robbing me of my Rare Metal and barely broke a sweat. I had to stay positive now. If I didn’t, I’d die out here—if not physically, then certainly mentally.

***

“Well, this is a problem.”

There was no more denying it. This was definitely not a dream. And that posed some issues. What kinds of issues? Well, for one thing, I had no idea what to do about any of this. I’d woken up on a ship drifting along through the dead, black expanse of the universe. On top of that, I didn’t know why this was happening and had little hope of finding a way home.

“Maybe someone made full-immersion VR a reality when I wasn’t looking, and I’m actually in a full-dive scenario.”

I tried messing with a few consoles and screaming the words “open menu!” and “log out!” but no menu or button that would let me out of this reality appeared. What a cruel, cruel world.

I was at an utter loss. I had no choice: I had to do what humans do best and adapt.

“Depending on my perspective, this might not be all that bad.” I had my beloved ship. I had my piloting skills. Best of all, I clearly had the ability to trounce space pirates with ease. If there really was no way out of this, I could live the mercenary life I’d built in *Stella Online*.

I also had cargo I could trade for a decent sum of money. I might even be able to use my ship and my skills to hunt down more pirates for some extra cash. The three ships I’d already taken down were carrying 19,000 Ener. I didn’t know what prices were like in this world, but space pirates in fully equipped ships like those wouldn’t be carrying chump change. The 19,000 Ener wouldn’t buy a whole ship, but it would probably let me refuel Krishna, stock up on ammo, and do some maintenance.

“Oh, yeah. I should grab their cargo and data,” I remembered. In *Stella Online*, you could harvest cargo and data caches from defeated space

pirates' ships. It wouldn't make you rich, but you could scrounge up some decent loot, maybe even learn the location of other nearby pirates. If the stars aligned, you might even discover the coordinates of a pirate home base. Locating, attacking, and defeating a whole pirate base would net you some serious treasure. You could also go the more noble route and just report it all to the galactic police. Not a bad payday, either way.

I navigated the Krishna in closer and gleefully stripped the pirate ships' corpses of their cargo, data caches, and less damaged equipment. All *Stella Online*'s ships carried drones for this very purpose, and my beloved Krishna was no exception.

"Nothing important, as far as I can see." I mostly found low-quality food and some booze among the pirates' cargo. Alcohol could sell for a decent price, but some galactic empires—empires that governed star systems—outlawed it, making it a tough item to actually profit from.

Outlawed or not, if someone found the booze, the worst they'd do was confiscate it and give you a warning. It didn't carry the high fines and potential exile that illegal slavery or hard drugs did. Those things might even provoke a physical response from the galactic police, and you definitely didn't want to go toe to toe with them.

"Ooh!" The data caches were a hit. Not only did I glean the coordinates of the main station in this galaxy, but I also learned the location of the space pirates' home base. I'd get more just from selling this info than anything I'd filched from the ships.

Unfortunately, the cache also revealed that there were no habitable planets in this star system. Nothing out here but asteroids rich with ore. That didn't mean it was deserted. Those asteroids would have mining stations and prisons where criminals were forced to work, and there were several trading colonies stationed nearby.

"No data on nearby star systems, huh?" Unfortunately, the cache didn't go beyond this star system. It wouldn't help me find a neighboring system that might be friendlier. I had no clue where this star system was in relation to the rest of the galaxy, but accessing the information network at a station or colony was probably my best hope of finding out. "Might as well go for the trading colony, then."

I set my sights on the largest trading colony in the star system. According to my information, I'd also find the police headquarters for this system on that colony. It would be a convenient place for receiving my bounty *and* selling the information I stole.

I set the main generator's output to cruise and turned the ship toward the trading colony. A little nudge on the throttle got the ship up to ample acceleration so I could activate the faster-than-light drive.

The engine roared. The scenery around me bent and warped. Stars bled into streaks that flowed past the windows. I didn't know the practical theory behind the FTL drive, and *Stella Online* didn't really explain the details, but I knew it was mostly used for long-distance travel within star systems and I could definitely tell why. I was moving insanely fast. The universe rushed past my windows. Debris pinged against the ship but didn't leave any real damage. Maybe there was some special technology keeping me safe?

My beloved Krishna also had a system for navigating between star systems: hyperdrive. The ship could slip into the hyperspace lanes between star systems to travel at speeds far faster than light. I didn't know the particulars of the underlying theory, but the important part was that it'd let me hop between star systems. I didn't really need to know all the nerdy details to make it work. I just had to sit back and enjoy the ride, which was fine by me.

I could also travel super-long distance via wormholes. Of course, it wasn't as easy as just hopping into any old wormhole I happened to find. They were usually managed by NPCs belonging to galactic empires, and heavily regulated. Some players could help out the empires and get access to wormholes, but a normal mercenary like me wouldn't be so lucky.

Even as I sped along pondering the mysteries of interstellar travel, I passed an enormous gas giant. The incredible sight made me want to turn off the faster-than-light drive and admire the awe-inspiring scenery of space, but I had to hurry to reach that trading colony. If I sat around ogling the wonder of space, I could get attacked by more pirates.

For now, my top priority had to be reaching the safe harbor of a trading colony and gathering information. I'd have time later to admire all

the gas stars, asteroid clusters, and wondrous unknowns of space I wanted. At least, I hoped I would.

Still, I took in as many of the incredible sights around me as I could. I was no sci-fi nerd, but who could turn down a display like this? Curiosity was a valuable thing; it didn't hurt to indulge it a little.

I was still stargazing when the Krishna's support AI notified me that I was approaching my destination. I braced myself to turn off the FTL drive, but the craft decelerated much more smoothly than I expected all on its own. Whatever happened to inertia and all that? Maybe there was some force field protecting the ship that I didn't know about. I used a touch pad in the cockpit to message the trading colony and request permission to dock in their hangar.

They responded promptly. "This is the Port Authority of Tarmein Prime, accepting your docking request. Um, Captain…I'm sorry. It seems the data regarding your name is corrupted."

"Huh? Oh… This is the Krishna. My name is…" I hesitated. My name, huh? My real name was a pretty darn boring and common one, but maybe it would sound interesting and unique compared to the naming conventions of this universe. My in-game name was probably a safer bet, though. "Hiro. I'm Captain Hiro."

Thus, on the tenth day of the eighth month of the 2,397th year of the Grakkan Empire's calendar, the mercenary named Captain Hiro was reborn.

Chapter 2:
My First Space Colony

IT'S ABOUT TIME I told you about me: Satou Takahiro.

Location: a city in Hokkaido. Age: 27. Relationship status: single.

After graduating from high school, I went to a technical college in my hometown and joined a firm in that same town. Back in college, I dated a girl I met online, but…you know how long-distance relationships are. We broke up. I got signed on as a network administrator since I was "good with computers," but I really had no actual expertise so I struggled to learn on the job. I spent most of my workdays flipping out at coworkers who managed to get viruses from every conceivable source: news pages, online shopping, fishy browser games, even porn sites.

My hobbies? Video games. That's it. And I wasn't all that picky. I'd play Japanese and Western games alike. For a while, I was obsessed with first-person shooters, playing them so much that I hit the top of the scoreboards. I never quite had the skill to take first place, but I was among the very best in Japan at the time.

Since my coworkers thought I "looked scary" with my "intimidating eyes," I didn't really get much social interaction or camaraderie in my daily life. That's what drew me to *Stella Online*, a game that allowed me to explore the vast reaches of space on my own. In the end, I got addicted to it.

That's pretty much all you need to know about me. Oh, right—I like carbonated drinks. That fizzy sensation in the throat is just incredible.

That's enough about me. Let's get back to my current predicament.

"And where did you obtain all of this Rare Metal in your cargo?" The Port Authority seemed intent on interrogating me.

"I got all the stuff in my ship from defeating and looting space pirates. Any other problems?" I was fortunate that alcohol wasn't contraband in this colony with how curious they were about the Rare Metal. I had no clue where the pirates had gotten it, so my only option was to play innocent.

At this point, I was an unaffiliated, uninteresting, self-styled mercenary with no proof of identity. How would you feel if a guy like that strolled in with tons of precious metals? Yeah, suspicious. *Extremely* suspicious. I couldn't blame the Port Authority worker for being thorough in his questioning.

"And you absolutely cannot tell me where you got it?" he pressed.

"I've been telling you where I got it: from the pirates. This pointless questioning is really irritating." Was this guy talking in circles intentionally? Was he waiting for me to get annoyed and blow my own cover? Or did he want something else, like a bribe?

Oh ho ho, I know what it is. I bet he wants to make me suggest a bribe first so he can use that to either arrest or extort me. It was a waste of time to play along with stupid games like this. What to do, then?

I was still pondering my predicament when someone barged into the questioning room without so much as a knock. She was a young woman; maybe "girl" was more accurate? I'd be lying if I said she wasn't pretty darn hot, too. Nice features, shiny blonde hair, red irises, and a pure white uniform with a red mantle. Her dress made her look like some heroic lady knight or war maiden.

She seemed calm and mature on the surface, but her eyes were as penetrating as a bird of prey's. It would be best not to be fooled by appearances with this one.

My Port Authority "friend" quickly fell to fawning. "O-oh my, Lieutenant Serena. What brings you here?"

"I saw an unfamiliar ship in the hangar. I presume he is the owner of the craft?" she asked, pointing at me.

“Y-yes, ma’am.” The Port Authority worker broke out into a nervous sweat as he handed this military woman the tablet he was holding. She skimmed the tablet, and then her gaze turned to me.

“That is quite the quantity of Rare Metal. I trust it wasn’t obtained through unsavory means?”

“Swear on my life,” I replied.

“Hmm… Are single mercenaries capable of defeating space pirates? You’re not even registered to a mercenary guild. Do you have anything else you’d like to report?”

“There was coordinate data on their ship that seems to point to their home base. I got that info from analyzing the data caches of the destroyed pirate ships. I was hoping to hand over that info while I grabbed my bounty, but I got dragged here as soon as I revealed what was in my cargo.” I shrugged for good measure, just to emphasize how little I really knew about all this.

Something in her bearing reeked of galactic police. She clearly outranked my buddy from the Port Authority. If I made it clear I planned to cooperate, maybe she would help me out here.

“You have no proof that his cargo is stolen, correct?” she asked the Port Authority guy.

“Y-yes. That is true.”

“Then I don’t see the issue. Will he be selling his cargo to the colony? We’re awfully lacking in Rare Metal, so this could benefit us greatly.”

“B-but…”

“But what? Do you have some sort of information that I, the daughter of Marquess Holz, should know about?”

“Er, well…”

“Because it seems to me like the real problem here is a Port Authority worker holding up incoming ships’ cargo in the hopes of extorting bribes.” Lieutenant Serena grinned at the Port Authority worker, who shook like a leaf under her glare. So did I, to be honest; despite the smile, she was terrifying.

“I-I would never do such a thing!” he said.

“Here’s what’s going to happen. We will buy the Rare Metal from him at a fair price. This upstanding, self-styled mercenary will receive Ener for ridding us of space pirates. Then, he’ll likely use that Ener to buy things from our colony. Everybody wins, no?”

“Y-yes, ma’am, of course! I will process the paperwork right away!” The Port Authority worker jumped up from his seat and bolted from the questioning room like a prisoner making his escape. Maybe he was. Maybe he really wanted to escape those heavy glares that badly. Either way, it left me alone with this Serena.

After the Port Authority worker’s exit, she turned to me. “My apologies. Sometimes he is a little too…dedicated to his work.”

“Nah, I get it. I am pretty suspicious, I guess.” It truly wasn’t his fault. I had no achievements with neighboring mercenary guilds; most likely, none of the star systems around would even recognize my ship. The data that should have listed me as captain was corrupted. I could make it through a biometric authentication, which had prevented them from taking the Krishna from me completely, but they easily could have confiscated my ship and everything in it.

“That’s true. It would almost be less surprising if you’d wandered here from an entirely different universe. How did you end up in this star system anyway?”

“Seems like there was an accident while I was mid-hyperdrive,” I began. “I don’t remember much about the accident itself aside from being confused along the way. I was sitting there panicking when the space pirates attacked, but I managed to deal with them and harvest their cargo and data caches. Analyzing the data brought me to this station. Fortunately, I can at least remember my name and my status as a mercenary.”

I told her about myself, mixing in a few careful lies. I’d concocted the “accident” backstory while talking to the Port Authority worker. It wasn’t airtight, but it was tough to prove wrong.

“So your memories are unclear?” Serena asked. “I hope you understand that you’re under suspicion of being a spy from the Belbellum Federation.”

“That doesn’t really add up. If I was part of this…Billbelly Federation?”

“Belbellum.”

“Yeah, that. If I was a spy from the Belbellum Federation, would I brazenly carry around unsourced Rare Metal, pilot an unidentified craft, and try to park right at the front door of this colony? And claim I was an unidentified, self-styled mercenary on top of all that? I stand out pretty badly here. If I was in charge of a spy like that, I’d clock him as soon as he proposed such a ‘brilliant’ plan.”

“Well, what a coincidence. I would do the same.” The military woman giggled. She was adorable when she laughed like that, though her scary first impression still had me keeping my distance. “Very well. I will notify the police station about you. Be sure to pick up your bounty and hand over the data caches, okay?”

“You have my thanks.” I earnestly bowed my head in gratitude. She smiled, satisfied, and turned to leave…except before doing so, she faced me again.

“You’re an interesting one. We will formulate a battle plan based on your data. I trust you’ll join us?” She didn’t wait for an answer before smiling and leaving. It might not have been as terrifying a smile as before, but it still reeked of danger. Exterminating space pirates should be a cushy job, but I couldn’t quite relax knowing she’d be around.

Eventually, the Port Authority worker returned and released me from the questioning room. My stomach growled almost immediately. “Now, in exchange for your Rare Metal, we will pay you 2,500,000 Ener,” the Port Authority worker said. “Is that acceptable?”

“Sure.” I opened a small terminal, something like a smartphone, and found 2,500,000 Ener deposited into my account. I’d discovered this terminal in the living space storage area behind the Krishna’s cockpit and recognized it instantly. It was one of the most common tools in the galaxy. With one of these babies, you could take care of communications, navigation, funds, and other tasks right in the palm of your hand. I’d found some other helpful things in the living space storage area, but all I carried now was my terminal and a laser gun for self-defense. Naturally, they’d

confiscated the laser gun when they dragged me in for questioning, but I would definitely take it back when I left.

"Need anything else? If not, I'm off to the police HQ so I can get this bounty and take a nice nap. Cool?" I said.

"No, that is all. Thank you for your time," the Port Authority worker said.

"Right. Well, later." There wasn't much use in getting mad about the whole debacle at this point. I left the Port Authority behind and headed right for the police station. Lieutenant Serena had already told them about me, so I got through my business there quickly and painlessly. Along with the 19,000 Ener I'd harvested from the space pirates, I received a prompt payment of 150,000 Ener for the information about their whereabouts. Now, my total funds were 2,669,000 Ener. *Nice!*

I got to ask the police about commodity prices around the colony. Basic meals were about five Ener, going up to ten to fifteen if you wanted to get fancy. A liter of clean drinking water would cost you three Ener; anchorage fees for spaceships were 150 Ener for twenty-four hours. I guess you could say one Ener was roughly equivalent to one hundred yen or so, which meant that water was pretty pricey. Same with the anchorage fees; 15,000 yen a day was rough. But such were the costs of being in a colony. Air was included in those prices. Both the air and the water was valuable around here. Really, when I thought about it, it was a pretty honest price given how precious resources like those were for a colony.

Hmm. Assuming I slept in my ship, a day's stay at this colony would mean three meals for fifteen Ener, four liters of water for twelve Ener, and anchoring for 150 Ener, for a total of 177 Ener.

Nice! I can stay here for forty years, though I imagine I'll run into more problems if I stay for that long. Maybe I should find a more permanent place to live. Regardless, as long as I didn't blow all my money on dumb stuff, I had enough to live on without too much stress for a while. Even faced with a huge, unknown universe, knowing I had enough cash to get by was a huge relief. I'd slipped past pirates and government officials alike, and I made a good chunk of change in the process. I returned to my ship with light steps and high spirits.

***

I spent the next few days just gathering information by connecting to the trading colony's network. I didn't do anything illegal, of course; all of my intelligence-gathering was above board. I simply requested access to the Port Authority's network in order to view their information databases and their network administrator granted me access rights.

I started by compiling information on neighboring star systems and the space empires that controlled them. It would help with parsing the big picture here. It turned out I was in the Tarmein System, made up of four planets that revolved around a B-type star called Tarmein.

Tarmein sat close to the star, making it extremely hot and mostly useless. The next closest was Tarmein II, a gas planet made up of deuterium and helium-3, both of which were being mined to be used as energy sources.

An asteroid belt surrounded these first two planets. The asteroids within were being mined for their ample supplies of Rare Metal and other valuable ores. Two other planets existed outside of the asteroid cluster, aptly named Tarmein III and Tarmein IV. Not much creativity going on here.

Tarmein III's poisonous air and acid rain made the whole planet toxic. Yet both the air and acid rain were valuable substances in their own rights, and even the surface and underground contained useful metals. Prison-slash-mining stations where criminals did hard labor hovered in the planet's orbit.

Like Tarmein II, Tarmein IV was a gas planet. But this one was a long, long way from the trading colony, which meant it went largely ignored. Tarmein II was closer to the asteroid belt, so mining there was more convenient.

This whole star system was just brimming with resources. Merchants and mining ships of all sizes flew in to get a piece of the action, leaving space pirates with plenty of juicy marks. And that meant mercenaries had just as many juicy marks. There was one more thing that made working as a mercenary such a lucrative prospect here, but first I need to tell you about the space empire running the place.

The Grakkan Empire controlled the Tarmein System. The emperor and aristocracy had ultimate power over the region. In the past few years, their already poor relationship with the neighboring Belbellum Federation had deteriorated further, resulting in ceaseless skirmishes along their space borders. As for what made mercenary work here so profitable, the Tarmein System was extremely close to the border between the Grakkan Empire and the Belbellum Alliance. In fact, it essentially *was* the border.

"Staying in this space is gonna get me caught up in trouble, for sure." No doubt about it. It was a fantastic way to make money as a merc, but as of now I'd be leaping into a battle I didn't know much about. Participating in these skirmishes would mean that I was fighting against the official fleet of a space empire, a totally different beast from dealing with space pirates and their shoddy ships.

"Maybe I should go for a different star system then? Eh, still…" Serena definitely had her eyes on me after that questioning. Nobody made direct contact with me, but whenever I looked around outside my ship, military men were surveying it. If I left this star system in a hurry, they'd be hot on my trail. Better to let things settle down and do some mercenary work in the meantime.

"But…" I mumbled, surveying the Galaxy Map. Though I tried inputting a few star system names that I remembered from *Stella Online*, none of my searches yielded any results. I tried looking up a few other things. It turned out ship makers, abilities of ships in circulation, equipment, and items from *Stella Online* were all the same here. A lot my knowledge from the game still held true. However, there were also many ships and items that I didn't recognize at all.

The biggest problem, though, was each faction's strength. The Grakkan Empire that controlled this star system was massive. But I had no memory of a huge empire like that in the game, at least not in the places players had uncovered.

Players still hadn't reached the center the explorable areas of *Stella Online*'s vast galaxy. It was certainly possible that a big space empire like this one was still undiscovered on the other side of the galaxy. But then, shouldn't it be strange that I recognized ship makers from this area?

“Hmm. Is it even the same universe?” At this point, I couldn’t guess how useful my advantages—my beloved Krishna and my knowledge—would be. My knowledge could be biased, and that could lead to a fatal misstep. It would be smart to question what I truly knew, to wonder if my knowledge really matched this universe, and to make a habit of reconsidering all of it.

“I’d better stock up on food soon, too.” Over the past few days, I’d nearly exhausted all of the food in my cargo. Some of it reminded me of granola bars or jerky, but there was also canned food and cartridges for the automatic cookers.

Food cartridges were essentially processed algae cultures, while automatic cookers…well, put simply, they were like 3D printers but for food. They made meat and seafood so realistic that you’d never believe it was all just algae. They weren’t *tasty*, but they were edible. Some true sci-fi gadgetry.

The resulting garbage and my excretions were put through a recycling process on the Krishna, where they were compressed into blocks and delivered to the colonies. Apparently, the waste handling fee was included in the anchorage fee. I didn’t recognize the system at all; when a guy came to pick it up for me, I had to ask him about it. He scrunched up his face as if to say, *You seriously don’t know how to take a crap?*

Sorry, guy. Stella Online *didn’t teach me about this one.*

After that, I used the info network to look up other commonsense things I might not know about. It looked like I’d be mostly fine, though there was still a chance of running into some sort of embarrassing trouble in this world.

The Krishna itself was surprisingly livable. It was a small craft with a maximum occupancy of five; one room housed one person, and two rooms housed two each. It also came with a shower, laundry room, kitchen, and infirmary. The ship might have fooled someone from the outside, thanks to my renovations, but the Krishna was built for military use. Military duty meant being stuck on board for months or potentially years at a time while fighting for your life. Traveling the vastness of space was not a speedy prospect, after all. Clearly, the Krishna was constructed with all that in mind.

Unfortunately, the ship couldn't replenish my groceries. For that, I'd have to go down to the colony myself. I dressed as presentably as I could manage and left the ship, small terminal and laser gun in hand. I decided to walk around with the laser gun visible in its holster as a warning for people to stay away, the same way a prey animal will flash bright colors to ward off predators.

I had no idea if the gun even worked, as I had yet to test-fire it, but I had read the manual so I knew how to operate it. Theoretically, anyway. Maintenance was still a mystery to me. There was no manual for that part. I'd have to take it to a shop if I wanted that information.

Stella Online included a face-to-face combat mode, where pilots used laser guns and rifles to fight each other outside of ships. I won this gun for ranking first in a shooting tournament. The design was pretty cool, and it came with some interesting features, so I'd hung on to the thing.

Pilots could also fight each other using power armor suits and tank modes. I had a suit of power armor right in my cargo. It was high quality but perhaps overkill for a grocery run, so I left it behind.

"All right. Let's go, then." I had never lost face-to-face combat in *Stella Online*, but using past experience wouldn't necessarily go well in this universe. *Can't go pushing my luck.*

Chapter 3:
Poor Little Space Elf's Mercenary Guild

TARMEIN PRIME was torus shaped, er, maybe I should say *doughnut* shaped, and it was always rotating. That centrifugal force helped create the artificial gravity that stabilized the colony. It also meant the inside of the doughnut-shaped ring was walkable.

"Well, that's interesting." The ground seemed to go on uphill forever. Above me loomed a faraway glass ceiling. The vastness of space swirled outside that ceiling, broken by the hub at the center of the doughnut. Elevators led up to the hub, placed on the ground at equal intervals like spokes on bicycle wheels. Maybe it would be more accurate to say this place was like a bike tire rather than a doughnut, then, with all those spokes leading from the outer rim to the central hub.

"Welp, here goes." I wandered aimlessly, simply enjoying the scenery of the colony. Passersby took notice, but I didn't pay them any mind. I was too busy soaking in all these new sights. Sadly, I couldn't spend all my time sightseeing like some overwhelmed hick in a city for the first time. The colony didn't boast the proudest safety rating. A three out of five—decidedly average. My original home—Japan—was a five out of five for safety. A place where a guy like me could openly carry a gun definitely wasn't as safe as Japan.

I couldn't move about freely, though. The only place I was allowed to go was the Third Division, which was apparently not the nicest place. I didn't want to linger there long, but I also had no idea where to start. At least I had my laser. When some thugs shot me nasty looks, all I had to do was flash my weapon and they disappeared into an alley rather than mess with me.

That didn't prevent someone from pouncing on me from behind. "Hey, newbie. Nice gun ya got there." I spun around and faced a gorgeous, silver-haired woman. We're talking drop-dead, once-in-a-lifetime stunning. Her almost-transparent silver hair framed her face in a neat bob. She was on the small side, but it was clear she was also muscular and strong.

What stood out most of all, though, were the ears that poked out from her hair. Was she an elf? Did elves live in space? Did I think this was sci-fi when it was actually high fantasy all along? Either way, I didn't remember seeing anyone like her in *Stella Online*.

Okay, so maybe science fiction did include pointy-eared demi-humans from time to time. It was a staple of the genre. Nothing too alarming.

The best way to describe her clothes was perhaps "casual military." Definitely not elf-y. There was no fluttering sheer cloth here. She dressed like me: tough-looking pants, a plain shirt, and a sturdy jacket with a small laser in a holster fastened to her hip.

"What? You just gonna stare at me?" she demanded.

"Do you expect me not to be on guard when I'm accosted by a stranger? Have some common sense."

"Okay, fair enough. But I'm not suspicious. Can't you tell? I'm a mercenary, just like you!" The silver-haired elf mercenary smirked and puffed out her chest. Her breasts were…well, nothing to write home about. Not that they were *nonexistent*, but still. Maybe this world was stingy with elf breast sizes? I guess it was too soon to judge based on one poor little space elf.

"Excuse me? Where do you think you're looking, buddy?" Noticing my gaze, she glared and covered her small chest with her arms.

"Just looking at your meager breasts, since you puffed them out so proudly. Got a problem with it?"

"Don't give me that crap. You're a lively little newbie, aren't you?" Her grin turned fierce and predatory.

Might be a mistake to make this one mad. She was armed, after all. "How do you know I'm a newbie, anyway? What, do I have a sign over my head or something?"

"Okay, first off, can you stop being so intentionally annoying? It's giving me goosebumps and not the good kind."

"Sure. So?"

“Well, your outfit and that laser gun make it pretty obvious that you’re a mercenary.”

“True,” I agreed. Fair enough. On closer inspection, nobody was dressed quite like us. They all wore lighter, thinner clothing. We really stuck out among all that.

“Also, I saw you looking all around like you’ve never seen the colony before. That’s something people only do when they’ve never left their hometown in their entire life.”

“Interesting. You’re a smart one, poor little space elf.”

“The hell’d you just call me?”

“Nooothing at all. So, smart mercenary lady, what do you want from me?”

Her eyes narrowed with murderous intent for a moment. I needed to be more cautious about goading a small-chested woman like her.

“…Hmph, whatever. I’m just bored,” she sulked.

“Come again?”

“I know the galactic police are up to something fishy, but I’ve got no details, so I’m bored. I don’t wanna make a fool of myself by rubbernecking outside the colony, but there’s nothing going on *in* the colony, so there’s nothing to do. Sooo…I’m bored.”

“And?”

“*And*, I found a newbie while I was wandering around, so I decided to come and mess with you.”

“I see.” I didn’t, not really. But hey, if she wanted to mess with me, I might as well use her. I’d get information, and she would get to waste some time being entertained by the newbie. A win for everyone. “Okay, Miss. If you’re bored, how about you take me somewhere I can buy food?”

She thought for a moment. “Hmm, I dunno. There aren’t any places with booze around here, and that’s just boring.”

“Booze… So that’s what you’re after?” I still had the alcohol I’d filched from the pirates in my cargo hold. It probably wouldn’t sell for

much and I didn't partake of the stuff. This was as good a use for it as any. "I've got some alcohol containers I swiped from pirates back at my ship."

"Oh? And?"

"You can have it, as long as you show me where to get groceries. I could also use some advice. Maybe you could answer some questions, since you're my senior around here, y'know?"

"Hmm…" The poor little space elf cocked her head in thought for a while before finally agreeing. "Sure, I've got time to waste. Getting some booze makes the deal even sweeter. Prepare to learn the basics of merc-hood from me, your senior!" She immediately latched on to that word: *senior*. Not that I really cared. She was cute and her reactions were funny and I'd probably get a lot of good information out of the arrangement.

“Cool, sounds like we’ve got a deal,” I said. “Uh, I think you make deals on terminals, right? I’ll log in. Just give me your ID.”

“Sure. But if you stalk me, I’m blocking you.” We handed each other our small info terminals and exchanged communication IDs. Her name popped up: Elma. Now I not only had a name for her, but we could also trade goods between our ships via the terminals. “Hmm. Hiro, huh? That’s a really simple name.”

“Shut up. Elma’s just as simple, isn’t it?”

“Maybe, but it’s much prettier.”

“Yeah, whatever,” I groaned. Why was she so competitive over every little thing? Agreeing with her only made her grin widen. Maybe she was one of those lonely attention-seeking types. I hurried to send the booze to Elma’s ship. She accepted the contract right away, and the containers moved to her hold. “How does the transfer actually work?” I asked.

“You don’t know? They made it so connected hangars can access the colony’s mass transport system. That’s how they move stuff between the ships.”

“Huh, interesting.” So, moving cargo around was automatic here. Sounded like hauling crates by hand was a relic of centuries past.

“How long have you been a mercenary, Elma?” I asked.

“Five years. I’m practically a veteran in this galaxy.”

“Huh, I see.” Five years. That was even longer than *Stella Online* had existed. She truly did outrank me. “Guess you really are my senior. Thanks for the help.”

“That’s much better. It’s good to respect your elders!”

“Elders?”

“I’ll have you know that I’m fifty-three years old.”

“What? How? Are you just wearing a lot of makeup or something?” She didn’t even look like she’d hit twenty, let alone fifty.

“Nope. We just live a lot longer than you humans. No matter how healthy you are, you all die out by the time you hit 150. Our natural lives are at least 500 years long.”

“Oh, so it’s a difference in species, huh? If you’ve been a merc for five years, then that means you started at forty-eight years old, right? What was your life like before that?”

“D-does it matter?! It’s rude to pry into a merc’s past, y’know!” Elma snapped and jabbed a finger at me. Looked like I’d hit a sore spot.

I raised my hands in surrender. “Okay, my bad for asking. I was just curious. But just so you know, if you get that mad about the question, you’re basically confirming something bad happened.”

“Mrgh… A-as long as you understand.”

Yikes, whatever it was must have been truly awful. I didn’t want to pry. Better to avoid bringing it up and making her angry.

Elma gathered herself and we started walking together again. I tried a change of topic: merc basics. That should be safe.

I admit, my first impression of her as a poor little space elf prepared me for a ridiculous answer. But no! She actually gave me sound advice. “When you take a request, you have to go through your mercenary guild. Especially if you wanna avoid trouble,” she said.

“Guilds, huh? Speaking of, I gotta sign up.”

“What?! You’re a newbie *and* unlicensed?! You need to register before you even think about bothering with groceries!”

“Oh, okay. Sorry.”

She grabbed my jacket and dragged me back the way we came. A mercenary guild’s office sat right next to the elevator from the hangar bay. Elma fumed as she lectured me on the dangers of being unlicensed. According to her, mercenaries not registered to a guild would be treated basically the same as pirates, just without the bounty. In some cases, they could even be refused docking rights.

“Tough universe out there,” I said.

“As it should be! What, you think they shouldn’t be worried about some random weirdo flying around in a ship that could take down the whole colony in a single shot? How have you *not* been arrested yet?!”

“Heh. It’s funny you should mention that. I’ve got one heck of a tearjerker for you.” We reached the mercenary guild’s office as I spoke. I’d have to explain some other time.

The office was way nicer than I imagined it would be. For one thing, it was bright. The lights reflected off shiny floors. Cushioned, backless stools and a few counters furnished a waiting room. A signboard dangled from the ceiling above each counter. There weren’t too many employees, though. Maybe this wasn’t a very lucrative gig.

“It looks more like a government office than a merc guild,” I said.

“They’re pretty much the same around here. Let’s go to the reception desk,” the elf said.

“Gotcha, boss.”

We approached a counter behind which sat a stern-looking man covered in scars. His left arm was a mechanical prosthetic. *Now,* this was starting to look like a merc guild.

“Hey, what d’ya want?” he asked.

“We’ve got a newbie!” the elf said. “He’s been running around unlicensed.”

“Damn, unlicensed? I’ve heard of your kind, but you’re the first I’ve seen. Sit right over here, my man.”

“Uh, yes, sir,” I said. I sat as directed. This guy meant business. If I met him in my past life, I’d do everything I could to avoid him. He just oozed *crazy yakuza*.

“If you’re going around unlicensed, you at least gotta have a ship, yeah? Tell me your ship name and ID. Is it parked in this hangar?”

“Yes, sir,” I said.

“Pfft! You’re awfully nice outta nowhere. Are you scared?” Elma teased.

“Quiet, you.” I glared at Elma. She covered her mouth and giggled at me regardless. But seriously, how can you blame me? Anyone would be intimidated by this guy.

The scary receptionist entered my ship name and ID into a tablet. “I ain’t never seen a ship like this,” he said. “What’s the deal?”

“Oh, uh, origin is unknown. But I didn’t steal it, I swear,” I said.

“Yeah, I’m sure you didn’t,” he said. “Ah, whatever. It’s bad manners to bother mercs about their pasts, anyway. It looks like you hunted three pirate ships four days ago. Is that it? You don’t have any docking history, buddy.”

“I ended up near this colony because of some hyperdrive accident or something. My memories are pretty fuzzy. I’m not even sure where exactly I am. U-um, sir.”

“For real? Uh…hell with it, I don’t care. At least there’s no bounty on you. Also, cut out the politeness. People are gonna think you’re soft.”

“G-gotcha.”

It takes real guts to talk casually to a guy like you…

“You heard the man!” Elma cut in. “If they think you’re soft, you’re done for.” She turned to the receptionist and added, “Also, wow, you really don’t care about the rules.”

“Kid, you know there’s no point probing into his past. He’s got a ship and no bounty. Sounds fine to me.”

I jumped in with a question. “Oh, hey. Ships aren’t cheap, right? A guy can’t just wake up and decide, ‘Yeah, I’m gonna be a mercenary!’ and get the job that day. So how do you guys make sure you have employees?”

I’d done some of the research myself. I knew that a ship with useful gear would cost at least 500,000 Ener. Converted to Japanese currency, that was 50,000,000 yen. That had to be a pretty significant chunk of change.

“A lot of ’em are retired soldiers looking for a new life,” the receptionist explained. “They’re paid well, and they get the job done. A lot of people turn to mercenary work for a new life. Some rich people just do it for thrills.”

“Are there any educational facilities for mercs?” I asked.

“Yeah, but none in this star system.”

“I’m sensing some high barriers to entry.”

“Yeah, well, it’s a big galaxy. There’s plenty of demand out there.” Did the barriers to entry keep enrollment so low that it just wasn’t worth it to build many facilities? Or was there not enough work to make it worthwhile? Hmm. I couldn’t tell yet, but I decided to leave it at that.

“Registration’s done,” the receptionist said. “Next up is your test.”

“I’m getting tested?” I said.

“Yeah, buddy. We can’t know what jobs to give you if we don’t know how strong you are.”

“That sounds fair, I guess. How does it work?”

“We’ve got training simulators. You do it in there.”

“Okay.”

The receptionist called to someone in the back of the office before guiding us to a different room. Wait, why was Elma joining in on this?

She smirked when she noticed me looking. “I believe I have the right to see how strong our little newbie is.”

“Do you?” I retorted.

To be fair, she was the reason I registered at the guild so smoothly. I supposed I owed it to her to let her see my skills. It could be a good chance to show off to a five-year veteran. Someone with that kind of experience would be a good barometer of how I’d stack up in the wider universe.

“Here,” the receptionist said. The simulation room was larger than I expected. A massive room contained several enclosures, each the size of a small truck and housing a simulator. It was almost like they yanked the cockpits out of ships and lugged them in here. “Pick the one most like your own cockpit and strap in.”

“Awesome,” I replied. Ships’ cockpits differed greatly in design based on manufacturer, including their control schemes. As such, ships were made to be compatible with multiple cockpit blocks so the user could switch them out between ships. Fortunately, that was all part of *Stella Online*, meaning this was nothing new for me. “This looks good,” I said.

“Oh ho, the high-end military one. I’ll get her set right up for you.” The guy sounded impressed by my choice. Good. He left, apparently to start

up the machine that operated the simulators. Elma vanished at some point, too—likely watching from afar.

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"All right, we're gonna begin this evaluation," the receptionist announced.

"Understood. What's the ship body data for this test?" I asked.

"You've got it with you. You should be able to use it just like it's your own ship… Hey, whoa, what the hell?"

"What's up?"

"I mean, this ship's data is just… Can you use this, dude?"

"As long as it's the Krishna's data, yes." Was something wrong? In *Stella Online*, the Krishna was among the stronger ships, but I didn't know how it measured up in this universe.

"Ah, fine," the man said. "The test is meant to measure your skill using your own ship, anyway. It's a simple test: just get rid of all the hostile ships. All ships except yours are hostile. There won't be many at first, but they'll attack in waves. Over time, they'll get stronger and more plentiful."

"Understood," I said.

"Okay, let's get this show on the road. Start up your ship."

The cockpit went dark, dimming to minimal lighting. So they were going to follow me from the pre-startup phase, huh? I started up the main generator and immediately raised its output to battle mode. Outer space spread before me as the simulator began in earnest. It was crazy how realistic it looked.

The cockpit's artificial intelligence announced, "Unknown warships have appeared. Their weapons are online."

I activated my weapons in turn and deftly rotated my ship toward the enemy. Then I slammed on the accelerator. The g-force immediately shoved me back into my seat.

“Whoa! It even replicates g-forces when you accelerate.” What kind of crazy tech were they using for this? If this universe was the same as *Stella Online* then artificial gravity generators should exist. It had to be something like that.

An enemy turned sluggishly to face my ship, and I took a bite out of their flank. Four weapon arms emerged from the Krishna. I squeezed the trigger and four beams of light flashed, piercing the enemy’s hull. The ship exploded an instant later.

“Wow, they’re weak,” I said. The slow, plodding enemy ship looked like a transport vessel based on its large cargo size. Was that really the best they had? More enemy ships appeared, but none of the weak, slow, frail crafts stood any chance against me. This was like shooting fish in a barrel. When would I get to show off my real skills?

“Heh. The newbie evaluation program ain’t nothin’ to you, huh?” The receptionist sounded impressed.

“My ship’s just way better than theirs,” I said.

“Yeah, also true. Anyway, let’s start a new program.”

“Understood.”

We tried the next evaluation. It was a little better than the first, but the enemy still lumbered at me, slow and weak, little better than those pirates from four days ago, honestly.

“They’re so weak that it’s hardly satisfying to blow them up.” I was getting disappointed now.

“Buddy…that’s the veteran training program.”

“Ha ha ha! That’s a funny joke. Got anything harder?”

“Yeah, but…I don’t think this is gonna work out.”

Finally, some worthwhile opponents appeared. Ten space pirates rushed at me from the very start and they were armed with real weapons this time, firepower that was actually strong enough to make me sweat a little. Live ammunition and explosives were easy enough to deal with though, as long as I was careful. I didn’t need to fret about the lasers. They might as well have been pea shooters for all the punch they packed. The

final light cruiser provided me with a bit of entertainment, at least until I slipped into his blind spot and annihilated him.

"That was a little satisfying, I guess," I said. Finally, a decent fight. Was that their most difficult level? Surely there was more.

"You gotta be kidding me!" the receptionist said. "Uh, well… Okay. Test's over."

"Understood." Well, that was easy. How would they evaluate me, though? It definitely didn't seem like I'd failed, judging by the receptionist's reaction.

I swiftly cut the generator's output, stopped the simulation, and hopped out of the cockpit. The receptionist and Elma waited for me at the entrance, mouths hanging agape. They blinked at me like they thought I might be a simulation myself.

"How'd I do?" I asked.

"Let's talk about it back up front."

Well, that was vague. Couldn't he just tell me the result? Elma probably didn't know either, but she kept staring at me with this weird look. What was going on here? Confused, I followed them back into the lobby.

"Uh, so let's start with your test score," the receptionist began.

"Yup."

"You've passed."

"That's a good thing, right? Why the long face?" I said.

"Mercenaries are given ranks," he said.

"Oh?" This piqued my interest. Was it like those adventurer ranks people get in *isekai* novels? Was I about to get A-rank or S-rank here? *Nice.*

"So, there are combat ranks that give straightforward evaluations of your strength as a merc. We have iron, bronze, silver, gold, and platinum. Iron's the worst, platinum's the best," the receptionist said.

"I see. And?" I urged.

"The test you just took is the gold advancement test."

"Go on."

“And you passed it, but we can’t just give you gold right off the bat.”

“That makes sense.” There was no fun in starting at the very top. This ranking system wasn’t part of *Stella Online*. I wanted to take my time and actually enjoy it.

“You can’t hit gold rank without some kind of achievement,” the receptionist said. “Are you picking up what I’m putting down?”

“So far,” I replied.

“We’re gonna start you off with bronze, provisionally. Basically, think of it like we’re giving you your real rank after you replicate what you did in that simulation.”

“Forget gold,” I said. “If I start that high, I lose all the fun of climbing the ladder.”

“O-oh, okay.” The receptionist looked weirded out. Elma was glaring daggers at me.

What’s the big deal? Cut it out and start being nice to me. I’m just an innocent little newbie!

The receptionist continued, “Anyway, the rank is temporary, and you’re formally registered now. The guild acts as a backer for you, and you act as a draw for the guild. Make sure you don’t forget that.”

“You’re not gonna explain the bylaws for me?” I asked, a little annoyed.

“Nah, too much effort. Read ’em yourself. I’ll send you a message.”

“What a hard worker you are.” Whatever. It probably wasn’t urgent, and I’d get to it eventually. “And why is the Great and Wise Elma in such a poor mood?”

“Silver,” she said curtly.

“Huh?”

“I’ve been doing this for five years and I’m *silver*.”

“Oh, uhh?” I glanced at the receptionist.

He looked away and said, “You’ll probably get bumped to silver after one mission.”

“Ah. Mmm.” Welp, this was awkward as heck.

“Grr…” Elma grumbled.

“No matter what rank I get, you’re still the senior!” I said. “Remember, Elma, I’d be unlicensed if not for you. I still don’t know left from right. I’m a mere slug who doesn’t even know where to get groceries! Elma, I’m counting on you!”

“R-really?” she said. “Then fine. Let’s actually go get those groceries now. As your senior, I will teach you where they are.” This poor little space elf was so easily fooled by my empty, obvious praise. Hook, line, and sinker.

“Yaaay. You’re so cool.” More empty praise from me.

The receptionist cut in. “If you want a map of the colony—”

But I interrupted him. “We’re off!” I made a hasty escape with Elma in tow. *Careful, guy! Don’t put her in a bad mood again or I’m lost… Although I guess I wouldn’t have to worry about that if I had taken that map he offered.* Eh, whatever. Better to just go with the flow.

As we headed back out into the colony, Elma explained everything she knew about being a mercenary in the Tarmein System. Tons of pirates set their sights on merchant and resource-mining ships here. Being close to the border of the Belbellum Federation also made it a hot spot for mercenaries.

“Also,” Elma added, “they’ve been talking about large-scale pirate crackdowns lately, so mercs are flocking to this star system. And you came here without knowing that?”

“Yep. Like I said before, I drifted in because of an accident. I guess even my life support system was throwing up errors because my memories are super fuzzy. Thank goodness my ship was safe.” Okay, the memory thing was a lie, but she’d think I was crazy if I claimed to be from another dimension. Besides, this would explain why I didn’t know the basics of this universe. It was a solid cover story.

“Are you gonna be okay?” Elma sounded concerned. “I hear some people up and die out of nowhere after accidents like that. Maybe you should get examined at a medical station sometime soon.”

“Whoa, really? I should look into that.” The accident was a fabrication, but a thorough medical checkup could still be a good idea. After

all, I had no idea how I'd ended up here. I decided to put "go to a medical station and get examined" on my long to-do list.

Elma pointed ahead. "Oh, there's the grocery store!"

"That's it?"

A big sign on the front of the shop proclaimed it *Oishii Mart*. It was a strikingly…blunt name. *It's just the Japanese word for "tasty!"*

"That's a lame name," I said.

"Really? I hear it's from an old language."

"Is that so?"

Which part of the name is the old part? I had to wonder, but I decided not to probe too deeply. It had to be the Oishii part. This universe didn't seem to use Japanese anymore. *Wait, wait, wait. I'm speaking Japanese right now. How am I able to communicate with these people?* I asked Elma about it, and she explained that all intelligent life carried around devices that let them understand each other. According to her, that was just a totally normal part of life.

"Did you really forget that? Your amnesia must be bad," she said.

"Seems like it." I shrugged.

"Seriously, *are you okay*? I'm actually getting worried about you." The poor little space elf looked genuinely concerned. What a wound to my pride. "Just be careful. Let's go on in."

"Sure."

I stepped into the store, pausing to take it in. Canned food was lined up on shelves, alongside breakfast bars, tube-shaped nutritional supplements, and food cartridges. I also saw something too weird to possibly be food and disgusting creatures preserved in formaldehyde.

"They've got a lot," I mused. The whole place was packed, every shelf full.

"Yup. What do you wanna buy?"

"I don't know. What's good? Got any recommendations?"

“If you’ve got a cooker, why not just buy cartridges?” Elma suggested. “And if you’ve got some extra spending money, you could go for artificial meat.”

“Artificial meat…?” That sounded weird.

“That’s what I said. It’s efficiently-cultured protein. The stuff’s a lot more expensive than other food, but it tastes great.”

“What about normal meat and veggies?”

“Only the richest of the rich eat that stuff. Mercs make a lot, but it’s not typically in our budget.”

“Wow, that’s crazy,” I said.

So livestock meat and cultured vegetables were high-class foods here. I supposed that made sense. After all, it couldn’t be easy building a farm on a space colony.

Elma stared at me rather dubiously and asked, “If the phrase ‘normal meat and veggies’ comes to you that easy, does that mean you’re some kind of spoiled rich boy?”

“Hell if I know. My memories are too vague. Do I look like one?” I shrugged helplessly.

She shook her head, unconvinced. “Nah, I guess not. Still weird, though.”

“Then I guess I’m not a rich boy.”

I picked a few more groceries at Elma’s recommendation. I could also order water here. Though it was a little expensive, I splurged for some of that artificial meat, too. Apart from that, I stuck to food cartridges and non-perishables such as breakfast bars, along with some liquid food in tubes. She also suggested picking up some of that jerky-like stuff.

“How about the canned food?” I asked.

“I wouldn’t. If you open that in zero gravity, it could be a disaster.” *Yikes, so the moment you open it, it spews everywhere, huh?*

“Got any carbonated drinks?” I said.

“Carbonated? What’s that?” she said.

“Wha? Uh, I mean, like soda. Some people call it pop. It’s sweet, fizzy, and the best thing ever created.” *Please, please let her recognize soda at least.*

“Um?” Elma cocked her head in confusion. Oh God, she really had never heard of soda!

“Okay, so you know about flavored drinks, right?” I started over.

“Yep! There are tons of flavors.”

“You take that and you add carbonic acid—to carbonate it—and it makes the drink all fizzy.”

“I’ve never heard of that,” she said.

“What?!” Did carbonated drinks seriously not exist in this universe? I tried asking one of the grocery store workers, but they just apologized and gave me the same line as Elma.

“God is dead,” I muttered in defeat.

“You sound like some religious nut who just lost his faith,” Elma said.

In all the galaxy, not a single carbonated drink. Not one. *No, wait. Didn’t I read an article once about how you can’t drink soda on a spaceship?* Maybe it was the lack of gravity. Maybe it was the air pressure. Either way, it seemed the complications had made my beloved soda obsolete in this universe.

But wait, shouldn’t you still be able to drink soda in a place with normal gravity and air pressure? Why not drink it in a colony? Was there a problem with the pseudo-gravity they made using centrifugal force? I didn’t know. My brain couldn’t even begin to conceive of it. Okay, what about a normal house on a planet, then? Maybe soda would be popular there?

“I’ve decided.” Steeling my resolve, I declared, “I’m going to buy a detached house in a nice residential area on a planet.”

“Wow, that’s sudden,” Elma said. “What about this carbonation stuff made you want to do that? Neighborhoods on planets are *really* expensive. I mean, in the Grakkan Empire, only the top-class citizens have the right to own land. I hear you need hundreds of millions of Ener to buy that right.”

“You must be shitting me. That’s enough to buy a whale-class cruiser.”

“I’m serious,” she said. “An imperial soldier told me that.”

Hundreds of millions of Ener? That was too much, but I really wanted some soda! “Well, a man needs lofty goals.”

“Do what you want, buddy.”

Elma may have shrugged, but this was a life-or-death problem for me, one I intended to figure out.

I ordered my food and water. Most of it got sent to my ship, though I had a little bagged so I could snack before we left the store. I even played it cool and paid for Elma’s order, though all she got was a drink.

Chapter 4:
The Girl

"REMEMBER, you only got off so easy because you had me to guide you." The poor little space elf smirked as she jabbed a straw into a bottle made of some mystery material I'd never seen before.

"For sure," I replied dismissively.

The second we left the grocery store, a scream pierced the air. I followed the sound in horror.

"Ah! N-Nooo!"

"Stay still, dammit."

"Heh heh, finally got you."

"She's a little dirty, but hey, I don't mind."

"Let's get to it already! I can't wait any longer."

A group of thugs dragged a girl toward a back alley as she kicked and thrashed. It was all too easy to picture what they planned to do to her. My hand went right for my laser gun, but Elma tugged on my belt to stop me before I could reach it.

"Stay out of it," she warned.

"Are you telling me to just ignore that?"

"Do you know her?"

"Well, no, but…"

While Elma and I were debating, the thugs yanked the girl closer to the alley. She looked right at me, her wide eyes pleading for help.

"Then it's not your problem. *Stay out of it*," Elma repeated.

“But…” I hesitated.

“Listen, buddy. This stuff happens every day all over the galaxy. Are you gonna stick your neck out every single time? You’ve only got one life, my man. People who can’t take care of themselves get taken advantage of. You can save her now, sure, but she won’t last long anyway.”

Ouch. That was one heck of a cruel viewpoint. What hurt even more was that I couldn’t quite refute it. I was no god or superhero. I was just some crappy mercenary struggling to keep himself alive in this universe. What could I do for someone else?

“You’re not some big, awesome hero,” Elma said. “You’re just a normal guy with a ship.” Elma kept pressing, even as the thugs hoisted the girl up and carried her off into the alley. The girl held my gaze, still begging. She even reached out for me as though scrabbling for a lifeline.

“Guess so…” I said. Elma was probably right. Maybe not getting involved was common sense in this universe. But I just couldn’t live with it. “As if! Did you think I’d give up that easily, you heartless, cold-blooded elf?!” I couldn’t leave the girl to her fate. How would I live with myself? How would I sleep at night knowing I’d abandoned her like this? I’d toss and turn imagining all the ways I could have—should have—intervened. I didn’t plan to spend my whole life wracked with guilt.

“Wha?!” Elma gasped as I shook off her hold on my belt. I dropped my things and charged toward the alley. Grabbing my laser gun, I reduced the output to minimum and adjusted my grip.

“Give it up, girl!” one of the thugs demanded.

“Quit struggling! Do I gotta hurt you to make you understand?”

“N-no, please…” the girl begged.

“I oughta clock you a good one.” Another thug raised his fist above the cowering girl. Time slowed. I raised my gun in a fluid motion, aiming at his arm. The world held its breath as I steadied my sights and squeezed the trigger.

Pshew! Red flashed bright in the dim alley.

“Graaaah?!” The thug cried out in pain.

My shot blasted the thug's raised fist, exactly as I intended. I'd never fired a real gun in my life, yet the motion felt so natural, so easy. Maybe my in-game skills transferred to this, too. Was that even possible? Not that I was complaining. Whatever just happened, it was another weird thing I had to accept about this world.

"Wha?!" I fired at the rest of the stunned, gaping thugs. My shots weren't killing them, thanks to my lowering the output, but every one hit home. With each burst of red light, a thug screamed in pain.

"Owwww!"

"Ah! Ah?! Aaaaaah?!"

"Eeeeek?!"

Okay, maybe they screamed in *a lot* of pain. I didn't want to kill them, though, so I gave them one last warning. "Get the hell away! The next one will do more than just burn!"

They needed no further motivation. The thugs scrambled away down the alley, leaving just me, my laser, and the girl, who leaned against a wall with her clothes disheveled. Shock left her face pale and eyes wide as she stared at me.

I passed her and pointed my laser gun at the thugs' retreating backs as I said, "Fix your clothes while I keep guard. We're leaving."

"O-okay!" Her voice trembled on the brink of tears. Clothing rustled behind me. I glanced over my shoulder, just to be safe. If she was somehow in cahoots with the thugs, I could end up with a knife to the back for my good deed. Thankfully, she didn't do anything suspicious. The girl straightened out her clothes and then stood there waiting, watching me like I might have some answer for her. I didn't know what to do other than gesture back to the entrance of the alley. She nodded, red eyes wet with tears, and ran back to the main road with me following behind.

"Welcome back," Elma said.

Elma approached with my discarded items in her arms and a look of pure exasperation on her face.

"So," she said, "what are you gonna do about her?"

“Well, I mean…” I glanced at the girl, who was still staring at me. Our eyes met for a moment.

Despite the dirt smudged on her from her ordeal, she was pretty adorable. She stood about a head and a half shorter than me, but her chest was *enormous*, relatively speaking. She definitely put Elma to shame in that regard. She was like a girl out of an anime, a perfect little shorty I never dreamed I’d meet in real life. Her eyes and hair matched—both light brown. I’d have to call her “cute” more than “pretty” with her youthful features and soft face. The thugs’ rough treatment left her already dingy clothing in a pretty sorry state.

“Don’t just stare,” Elma interrupted. “Answer me.”

“I don’t know what to do with her,” I said. “O great senior, what do you deem best?”

“God, why did I even bother asking? Of course there’s nothing in that empty head of yours. Whatever, bye.” Elma huffed, shoved my stuff into my arms, and spun on her heel.

So that’s how you wanna play this, huh?

“I should’ve known,” I said. “You’re the type to use your junior and then toss him away, huh?” Elma stopped dead in her tracks. Her long ears twitched.

“Darn shame,” I said. “I should’ve known those were your true colors, but you had me fooled. I really thought you were my great and all-powerful *senior*.”

Her ears went on twitching as I continued. Just one more little push…

“I overestimated you, but it seems you’d abandon your junior without a thought. Might as well just go to that guy from the merc guild for everything I need to know, instead of this poor, little, rude, cold-blooded, small-chested elf.”

“I’ll kill you,” Elma growled. She charged back at me and seized me by the collar. My groceries fell to the ground in the process.

Ooh, scary.

“That’s my Elma!” I rejoiced. “I knew my senior wasn’t the kind of woman to abandon a poor, helpless little girl! Wow, go you! What a shining

example you are."

"You can cut out the forced compliments," she said. "Ugh, how'd I get stuck fixing this?"

"It's a nice waste of time, right? I believe in you, senior."

"Close that mouth of yours or I'll cut out your damn tongue."

"Sorry, sorry," I said.

Elma just sighed and looked away.

Ha! That's what you get for trying to use me for your entertainment. Just give it up, elf.

"The best idea would've been to ignore her like I told you to," Elma said. "Maybe you'd like to heed my advice next time?"

"Depends on the advice. Try making it more fun in the future," I taunted.

Elma fumed, face twisting up in fury. What a waste of her beauty.

"Just what kind of future are you imagining here?"

"I was thinking of letting this girl onto my ship," I said. "Maybe she could help out with chores or gather info."

"Chores? Are you saying she's your type or something?"

"My type? I mean, sure, she's cute." I glanced at the girl. She stood there pale and shaking, still shocked from the attack. Now definitely wasn't the time to comment on her crazy big chest, but I couldn't help daydreaming about the future, if you catch my drift. "We shouldn't just stand around here and chat while she's in this state. Let's find a place to sit and calm down."

"Fine, but you're paying."

"Aye-aye, ma'am." I turned to the girl. "Hey, let's go. We won't hurt you. If it hurts to walk, you can grab on to me."

"Okay." The girl nodded and timidly pinched my jacket.

You know you can actually grab on, right? It's a sturdy jacket; you won't stretch it that easy. Oh well. If it made her feel more at ease, I didn't mind.

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Elma led us to a café in a building adjacent to the mercenary guild. It reminded me of St. Marc Café.

Back home, what I ordered would have been called a café au lait and a sandwich; here, who knew? Elma just ordered a drink again. It took some coaxing to get the girl to say what she wanted. Eventually, she settled on the same drink and sandwich as me.

"So, what's your name?" I asked the girl.

"Um…Mimi," she replied.

"Oh, dang," I said. "I never introduced myself, did I? Hi, my name is Hiro."

"Shut up, you," Elma cut in. "So, Mimi? What can you do? Do you have any skills that would be helpful on a ship?"

Wow, that was one heck of a rude introduction.

"Umm… What do I need to be able to do?" the girl said.

"I think that answers my question," Elma said. "But I'll tell you, anyway. This lug here doesn't need help in battle, but he's pretty clueless when it comes to everything else. Supply runs, information management, negotiating with clients, contacting the guild, calling port authorities when you need to land: the list of things you might be able to help with goes on."

"I don't have any experience with any of that…"

"Thought as much. In that case, you can't do much other than being a maid. Cooking, cleaning…and since you're a girl, 'helping' him out once in a while."

"Pfft!" I spit out my drink at Elma's dirty suggestion. Helping me out?! Elma was way too direct!

"Wow, how dirty are you?!" Elma grimaced.

Okay, my bad, but come on! Can I really be blamed for that one?

"You're the one who said she'd have to *help* me out!" I said.

“And? That’s why you’re bringing her aboard, isn’t it?” Elma said.

I dared a look over at Mimi. Her fear had shifted to wide-eyed surprise. Shoot, she probably took it the same way as me.

“I think she’s cute and I’d like to be friends, yeah, but I didn’t go directly to sex like you, stupid!” I said.

“You’re really naive, huh? Maybe you *are* one of those sheltered rich boys.”

“Doubtful. So, what, is that common sense now? If a guy lets a girl onto his ship, they have to hook up?”

“In an equal relationship? Not necessarily. But you and her clearly aren’t in an equal relationship, so it’s obvious what people will think.”

None of this sounded right. It was like something from a hentai game. There was definitely nothing like this in *Stella Online*.

“No, no, no,” I said. “I’m not gonna make dumb demands like that. C’mon, I’m not *that* much of a pig.”

“Hmm,” Elma said. “Well, it doesn’t matter to me, as long as you know that’s what it’s gonna look like to everyone else.” Elma shrugged.

“Nngh…” When I shot a peek at Mimi, she blushed and cast her eyes down.

Girls, please, don’t do this to me! I’m not gonna do it! That’s not why I helped you in the first place, I mean it! I wanted to scream my denials, but that would’ve made me sound even more phony. I decided actions mattered more than words in this case.

“Mimi, what do you want to do?” Elma asked. “I mean, you *were* loitering near that alley. When innocent girls like you hang around places like that, bad stuff happens.”

“Well…” Mimi started.

“Did you commit a crime and run to the Third Division? Do you have any guardians?” Tears sprang to Mimi’s eyes at the mention of “guardians” and spilled down her cheeks. I felt awful. *Aww, come on, Elma, don’t make her cry…*

Mimi spoke through her tears. Her story wasn't too unusual. She grew up in the Second Division in a normal family. One day while doing maintenance on some sort of infrastructure responsible for the oxygen, her parents died in a tragic accident. Somehow her parents took the blame for the accident, which meant all their assets got forfeited, leaving Mimi with little to live on. Mimi was still a student at the time and couldn't work—which meant she also couldn't afford the taxes required to live in the Second Division. In the end, having no way to pay for the damages from the accident, Mimi got booted out and sent down to the Third Division.

"Wow, is that allowed?" I asked incredulously. "There's no safety net to keep stuff like that from happening?"

"Who cares?" Elma said. "What matters now is that this girl has no place to go."

"Yeah, I guess so. She really doesn't have many options left, does she?" If Mimi didn't want to live on my ship, she'd have to return to the Third Division alone. Next time someone dragged her away into an alley, she'd have little chance of being rescued like today.

Mimi bowed her head, her face wet with tears. "Please…I'll do anything. Just let me live with you on your ship."

"Of course," I said. "Don't worry. We'll make sure you're okay. Go on, eat your sandwich. You must be hungry, right?"

"Yes…" Mimi sighed the word out in relief and finally started nibbling on her sandwich.

Elma was looking none too pleased with me after all that. "So, my gentle and kind senior," I said, "I'll need you to tell me what preparations I have to make to bring Mimi on board."

"Seriously?"

"Seriously."

"It'll be expensive."

"Wait, what?"

Chapter 5:
Slap 'Em with a Wad of Bills

"LET'S SEE. There's the head tax, delinquency on the Second Division's residential tax, interest on said residential tax, the damages caused by her parents, and the fees for her right to travel freely. That adds up to…precisely 500,000 Ener."

"You cannot be serious."

The man behind the counter met my outburst with stone cold indifference. He was the very picture of a boring public servant with his neat, well-fitted suit and side-parted hair. And he was not budging on the outrageous sum he'd just demanded. Five hundred thousand Ener. In Japan that'd be…50,000,000 yen. How the heck did some back taxes add up to that?!

We'd come here, to Tarmein Prime's Resident Administration Bureau Third Division branch, to make formal preparations for Mimi to join my crew. But as soon as they confirmed her identity they'd started demanding shiploads of money for all her taxes and fees. I had no idea what was going on with any of this.

Elma bailed on the whole ordeal with some quip about how she hated government offices. Meanwhile, Mimi and I got summoned to this drab little room. As soon as the official announced the sum, Mimi went pale and shook like a leaf.

"I am entirely serious," the official said. "This is actually *less* than the true total because I truncated the decimals. Would you like to see the breakdown?"

"Sure, let's take a look," I said.

And I did take a look. I took a good hard look, and the numbers stayed the same. But how would I know what a reasonable fee was around here? What even were "fees for her right to travel freely?" Why did that cost 200,000 Ener alone? It sounded like a big number they'd just tacked on to jack up the total.

“Don’t you think it’s kind of awful to put the burden of unpaid debt on a child whose parents just died?” I said. “You don’t have any way of canceling out inherited debt or a voluntary bankruptcy system or whatever?”

“It’s not that we don’t,” the official said, “but the inheritor of the debt must file an appeal within three months of being notified of the liability. That grace period has already passed. The only safety net or exemption would be her staying in the Third Division. If she does that, she won’t have to pay back the debt.”

Some safety net. This guy wasn’t budging an inch, and he really expected “stay in the Third Division” to be some sort of consolation? Sure, she wouldn’t have to pay if she stayed here, but it was basically a declaration that this place had given up on her.

Besides, anyone could see what would happen to a little girl with no job or skills if she had to make her way alone in the Third Division. That wasn’t a safety net. They were throwing her away, treating her like garbage. Out of sight, out of mind. What was wrong with this place?

“I hear mercenary work pays well,” the man continued, “but surely 500,000 Ener is too much for you to pay. Any more discussion is a waste of both my time and yours. I would not know myself, but I assume there are plenty of places in the Third Division for you to *satisfy* yourself. Why not do that, instead of trying to frolic beyond your means?” He grinned sadistically, like this was all just so amusing to him.

Oh? Is that how we’re gonna do this? Despite the man’s insinuations, I wasn’t trying to drag Mimi off for whatever dirty crap he had in mind. But if he wanted to play it this way and look down on me, fine, I was willing to play his sick game just to call his bluff.

“Okay, let’s do it. Five hundred thousand, yeah? I can pay off that pocket change right now, if you want.”

“Excuse me?” The official blinked rapidly, taken aback by my suggestion.

Nice. That’s exactly the reaction I was hoping for.

“What?” I said. “I know you’re a piece of shit at heart, but is your hearing also rotten? Listen carefully: I’m going to pay off all 500,000 Ener

right here, right now. Get the paperwork ready."

"This is hardly the time for jokes," the official said.

"I'm not joking," I said. "Chop chop. Get to it. I asked you for that paperwork." I pulled my handheld terminal from my pocket to display just how willing I was to pay the ransom.

I gotta say, despite his crappy personality, the official worked fast once he finally got going. He put together all the paperwork in a hurry, even while obviously reluctant to do it.

Once the transfer of 500,000 Ener from my bank account to Tarmein Prime was confirmed, the man issued a certificate of release from debt, along with a certificate of her right to travel freely. That last bit cost a pretty penny. A "right to travel freely" came at such a steep cost because it basically exempted the bearer from paying taxes as long as they didn't settle down somewhere. It made up a full 40 percent of that 500,000 Ener, but it was like paying all your taxes in advance.

Explanations and documents and payments finally complete, we got the heck out of that dreary office. The moment we stepped outside, my terminal pinged to alert me to a message from Elma. Directions to a clothing store. Looks like that's how she'd spent her time while we were stuck with Side-part back there.

"Are you okay?" I asked Mimi as we walked.

"Y-yes, I'm fine." She still looked kind of shocked from the whole ordeal, but in fairness she'd been through a lot: being attacked by thugs, being saved by me, having to reveal her painful life story at the café, and learning of her debt at the government office. It was probably best not to push her. I didn't know how old Mimi was, but anyone would be wound pretty tight after that kind of stress. I really wished I could just take her to the ship and let her rest, but if she didn't get some new clothing now she'd have nothing to wear tomorrow. Her current clothing was dirty and torn from the attack; unfortunately, we couldn't really delay on getting her something new.

"How'd it go?" Elma asked when we met up with her at the clothing store.

"I smacked him with a wad of bills—uh, Ener," I said.

“Nice, nice. That’s how mercs do it! By the way, I went and picked an outfit I thought Mimi could wear.” She shoved a bag of clothes and a bill at me. Thankfully, this particular bill was a lot more reasonable than the one I’d just paid.

“I grabbed a bunch of everyday clothes, underwear, and other stuff she’ll need,” Elma said. “It won’t even be close to enough, so make sure you take her shopping again some time.”

“Thanks. That’s a huge help.”

“You ought to be grateful,” Elma huffed.

“Hey, I paid you a fair price. And you got to waste some time, right? Better than being in that government office, trust me.”

“It totally wasn’t worth the effort,” Elma said. “Ugh, whatever. Sure, it wasted some time. Can I go now? I wanna return to my ship.”

“We’re going back, too. Mimi’s gotta get some rest.”

“That’s a good idea. Mimi, make sure you don’t get on his bad side. Also, keep an eye on him. He has a tendency to stick his nose where it doesn’t belong. Before you know it, bam, he’s dead.”

“Y-yes, ma’am.” Mimi stood up straight and answered respectfully, as though Elma were a nice, reliable older sister or something.

“That goes for you, too, bub,” Elma said. “Keep her safe. That means no more ridiculous stunts like today. If you do something stupid and get yourself killed, she’s all alone again.”

“Yeah, I know,” I said. “You’re more caring than you let on, Elma.”

“That’s the wisdom of age. You might’ve forgotten, but I’m *way* older than you, little guy.”

“Oh, yeah. You did say that.”

She looked so young that it was hard to believe, but she’d said she was like twice my age. She certainly had the abundant energy of youth. No matter how hard it was to swallow, though, I just had to accept it. Energetic or not, Elma was *old*.

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When we returned to the ship, I showed Mimi her room. I took the private room but gave Mimi one of the two-person rooms, identical and facing each other across a hallway. Since they were basically the same, I didn't care which one she chose.

"I like this room," Mimi decided. "Um… Are you sure it's okay?"

"Of course," I said. "Once you put your stuff down, feel free to take a shower. After that, we can use the medical pod for a quick check of your vitals."

"Wow, you have a medical pod?" Mimi said. "Th-this ship is incredible. It's like a house from the First Division."

"That so?" I'd never actually seen the First Division, of course, so I had to take her word for it.

After sorting out rooms, I gave Mimi the complete tour: laundry room, kitchen, infirmary, training room, cockpit, and cargo hold. The whole dang ship.

"Try to avoid being in the cockpit except when I give you permission," I said.

"Yes, sir."

"Also… Oh, right. I'd better get you a terminal." She'd need a handheld terminal like mine so she could contact me and organize information. Hm, might not be a bad idea to get us matching tablets, too.

"Um, I don't need anything that expensive…" she protested.

"Don't worry," I said. "It's a necessary expense." I resolved to get her a tablet tomorrow. She'd need it when she left the ship. It wasn't like she was just going to stay on board 24/7. Plus, Elma said Mimi would need more clothing, so we'd be going out shopping again soon.

"You must be tired," I said. "Take a nice shower, get yourself clean, and rest. We can talk about the vitals check and your job after."

"Okay, sorry."

"Don't apologize; make that a thank you instead. Now, do you know how to use the shower?"

“Yes, I’ll be fine. Thank you.”

“Sounds good. I’ll be in the cockpit or my room, so if you need anything just let me know. Speak up when you’re hungry. We’re going to be living together, so don’t be shy.”

“Yes, sir.” Mimi nodded meekly. Good. There’d be no sense in her starving herself for the sake of modesty. Hopefully she really would speak up.

I left her to her shower and headed for the cockpit. She didn’t need me fussing over her. I still hadn’t asked her age, but surely she was old enough to manage some simple personal grooming on her own. How old was she, anyway? From her story, it sounded like she might still be school-age. My best guess placed her somewhere in her late teens. She was pretty short, but her curves definitely weren’t those of a child. Hmm, I’d have to ask later.

Having nothing better to do, I researched maps of the Third Division for the next day. I’d need to be able to navigate this place if I was going to find her some clothes and everyday necessities. *While we’re at it, should we buy medicine and stuff? Yeah, definitely. She still needs that terminal, too. We’ll have to hit a lot of shops to cover everything.*

I looked up some shops in the Third Division, and boy, were the reviews ever something. *They scammed me into buying fakes! The medicine was expired! I opened the box and there was nothing in it but trash!* Yikes. Okay, excluding those…not a whole lot left. It didn’t look like we’d have very good luck with the stores in the Third Division. Elma must have really known her stuff. The grocery and clothing stores she’d taken us to were some of the only good places to shop in the whole division.

I was still researching when Mimi poked her head in the open door of the cockpit. The shower had certainly helped. She looked cute after washing up, but she had to be cold in that skimpy clothing with the air conditioning going full blast.

“Are you hungry?” I asked.

Mimi blushed a little and nodded.

“All right. How about some grub? Good job letting me know; keep it up.”

“Yes, sir.”

I could sympathize with how uncomfortable it was to ask for food, but it was important that she kept doing it. She followed me to the kitchen, bashful the whole way. I called it a kitchen, but it didn’t have any real cooking implements. The automatic cooker did most of the work, so maybe it was more accurate to call it a cafeteria.

“Eat anything you like, as much as you like,” I said. “Oh, hey, I did buy some artificial meat. I think I’ll try it out. Wanna give it a go, Mimi?”

“I’ll try it, sure,” she said.

I used the menu on the automatic cooker to pull up all the foods with artificial meat. I chose a large serving, while Mimi picked a more normal size. In just a few moments, the cooker dinged to announce our meals were ready.

“So this is artificial meat,” I mused. “It’s white, but dang, it tastes great.”

“Yes, it does.”

The meat on the plate was nearly the color of whitefish and covered in some sort of sauce. Pilaf and potato salad were on the side. And boy, the machine wasn’t kidding when it said “large.” My serving was enormous.

“Mmm. Not bad at all,” I said.

“It’s delicious,” Mimi agreed.

I could almost believe I was eating a meal from back home. The artificial meat was chewy but not greasy, and the sauce only made it more delicious. The fat from the meat flavored the pilaf so it complemented the meal perfectly. And I could have sworn the potato salad was real, honest-to-god potato salad.

"You don't have to force yourself to eat it," I said when I noticed Mimi dithering over her portion.

"I'm okay…" Mimi said.

Mimi picked at the normal helping, apparently still trying to clear her plate, but it looked like a bit too much for her. I'd have to suggest a small serving next time, perhaps.

We tossed our plates in the dishwasher when we were done, but then Mimi just stood there looking up at me. I raised an eyebrow.

"Wh-what do we do next?" she asked nervously.

"Next? Hmm, well, it isn't good to sleep on a full stomach. Maybe we could go work out in the training room for a bit?"

I'd become well acquainted with the Krishna's training room from all my time holed up on the ship after arriving here. I used it nearly every day to keep in shape. The whole thing was state of the art, with all the equipment you could ever need to stay in shape on a long space journey.

As much as that all sounded tempting to me right now, Mimi looked dubious.

"You can go ahead and rest, Mimi. You must be tired," I said. After all, she'd been through a lot in a single day. If I was feeling sleepy, she was probably completely exhausted.

"No… Um, okay. I'll rest."

I was relieved she'd changed her mind. She looked like she was nodding off even as we said good night, and I headed to the training room.

I kept my training regime moderate. I wasn't trying to be a bodybuilder or anything. The whole ship worked in tandem to design my workout plan, from the automatic cookers to the terminals. All that data got grouped up, organized, and calculated to produce the optimal regimen for

my body. It wasn't an easy workout, but at least I knew I was in good hands and had a tangible goal for my training.

I went right from the gym to the showers. It wasn't much different from how I'd lived before Mimi came on board, but having her here made me extra aware of my hygiene. If she thought I was a slob, I'd die inside.

I took a little more care than usual with my shower that night before heading for bed. The one downside to the whole arrangement was that I couldn't keep wandering around in my underwear, even for a quick trip from the shower to my room. I threw my jacket and pants back on and hurried to bed. The moment I hit the mattress, a huge yawn seized me. What a day. All I'd planned to do was go grocery shopping, but the moment I'd met Elma everything had gone off the rails. That little space elf invited trouble, I could feel it. *Maybe I should steer clear of that one.*

Despite all the craziness, though, I had to admit that I felt great. I was living a way healthier lifestyle here than I had back home: frequent, balanced meals, optimized exercise, sufficient sleep. It didn't get much healthier than that.

While I pondered all this, Mimi peeked around my open door. For some reason, she was blushing and nervous.

Ah, whoops. I was so used to leaving doors open because I lived alone. And I was in my freaking underwear! "What's wrong? Also, I'm half-naked. Gimme just a sec to get dressed."

"…"

She paused only a moment before stepping right in while I was still pulling my pants on.

"Whoa, what?!" Why had she barged in when I told her to wait? And what was with that negligee? It was totally see-through. I couldn't avoid getting a look at her whole body.

"Stop, stop, hold on! Why?!" I covered my eyes immediately, though I have to confess I gave in after a second and peeked between my fingers. I couldn't help it.

"I'm here to do my job," Mimi whispered as she approached. She had nothing on but that sheer negligee. Even her feet were bare.

“No, wait, seriously. We should get to know each other better first, right?” I said.

“This is all that I can do. I don’t mind doing it with you, Hiro.”

She said my name for the first time! No, wait. That’s not what I should be focusing on. Aaargh, no! Miss, please, no! Aaah, we can’t do this, we mustn’t!

As I panicked, Mimi sat next to me on my bed and hugged me. Something soft pressed against me. For someone so small, her chest was not only huge, but dangerous. *I’ve been bombarded! Heeelp!*

“I took my medicine, so I’m fine,” she said.

“Medicine? What medicine?!”

“Elma got me this birth control, and, um…stuff that makes the first time hurt less. She gave me this negligee, too.”

Damn that elf! What has she done?! Or am I supposed to say thank you?!

“U-Um… Do you not want me? Would you prefer someone prettier like Elma?”

“That’s not it at all, I swear. You’re not the problem.”

“But this is all I can do to pay you back. And I…I’m so scared. Please?”

Scared? Scared of what? I didn’t understand this situation at all.

Mimi continued, “I don’t have any other skills to offer, so I’m doing this to protect myself. If I do this, you won’t…abandon me.” Her voice tapered off. Oh God. She was actually thinking I would change my mind and kick her out if she wasn’t “useful.” That’s why she was doing this. The implications there cut deep. Did she think I was that much of a piece of garbage?

“I don’t think you would do something like that, Hiro, but…can you reassure me?” she said.

“Oh? That’s it?”

It wasn’t that she doubted my character. She just wanted to be reassured. *But still!* I was continuing to panic when my handheld terminal

dinged beside me, flashing an eerie message. *Take responsibility and give her what she wants.*

Only one person ever sent my terminal messages. This whole thing had been arranged by that poor little space elf.

"Please, don't abandon me," Mimi said. She sounded on the verge of tears. Elma must have really convinced her that I'd kick her out if she didn't do this. Next time, I'd put that elf in a darn armlock, I swore.

"Okay," I said. Mimi gasped. "Uh, what am I supposed to say at this point? This is really strange. I'm at a total loss, to be honest." All I could think to do in that moment was return Mimi's hug and pat her on the back.

Finally, I said, "I'll be as gentle as I can."

She nodded and relaxed in my arms.

***

What am I supposed to do?

That mantra played over and over in my head for the past half a year. After the accident, after Mom and Dad died, I faced a world of constant worry. Crushed under an impossibly large debt and with my nest egg steadily evaporating, I had to drop out of school and live the stingiest life I could, but bankruptcy still barreled toward me. I was running out of time.

It all came to a head three days ago, when I lost my home and my right to live in the Second Division. They forced me into the Third Division, which everyone knew wasn't the nicest neighborhood. Only people who couldn't pay their taxes lived there. Violence and vice ruled in the Third Division, the colony's trash heap. Oh, how low I'd fallen.

I wasn't stupid. I knew what happened to women who ended up in the Third Division. They got kidnapped, treated like playthings, then drugged and sold until they couldn't attract customers anymore. When men were done using them, they got tossed aside in some back alley to die. Every once in a while a mercenary or merchant would buy a girl's freedom, but that was very lucky and very rare. It was way more likely you'd just wither away in an alleyway, suffering from drug withdrawal, all alone. The bodies got cremated right alongside the garbage.

The prospect was too terrifying to face. I ran. I hid. But with no Ener for food or water, and my terminal confiscated by the colony, I didn't have many options open to me.

"Stay still, dammit."

"Heh heh, finally got you."

I was exhausted when that group of men kidnapped me, too tired to even flinch away from the disgusting smirks on their faces.

"She's a little dirty, but hey, I don't mind."

"Let's get to it already! I can't wait any longer."

My feeble resistance didn't even slow them down as they dragged me into a dark alleyway and violently tore away my clothing.

“Give it up, girl!”

“Quit struggling! Do I gotta hurt you to make you understand?”

I resisted, one last surge of desperate strength.

“I oughta clock you a good one.” The man lifted his fist. The moment he brought it down, I’d be done for. But just before he did, a burst of red light flashed bright in the alleyway.

“Eeeeek?!” Each time the light dyed the darkness red, another thug screamed.

“Get the hell away! The next one will do more than just burn!” The assertive voice stopped the thugs in their tracks. The one holding me hastily let go, fleeing with the rest of them.

I slumped against a wall. Although still dazed from my ordeal, I tried to find the source of the voice. Another man stood in the alley now, dressed in sturdy, unfamiliar clothing. He had to be a mercenary. He even had a gun, though he looked pretty nervous about actually using it. He had black hair and gentle eyes. I placed him in his early or mid twenties, perhaps. He shot a look my way before pointing his laser gun in the direction the thugs had fled.

“Fix your clothes while I keep guard,” he said. “We’re leaving.”

Was I really safe? I hastened to straighten out my clothing, barely believing my rescue was actually real.

“Welcome back.” When we left the alley, an elf woman dressed like the man addressed him. She was probably a mercenary, too. *What is their relationship?* Why was I wondering that? Why did it bother me?

“So, what are you gonna do about her?” the elf said.

“Well, I mean…” The man turned his attention to me. His eyes really did look kind. They helped ward off some of the terror still pulsing through me after the attack.

“Don’t just stare. Answer me,” the elf said. The elf and the man talked like old friends. For some reason, my heart ached at the sight.

“I was thinking of letting this girl onto my ship,” he said. “Maybe she could help out with chores or gather info.” I was shocked by the man’s

words. *Wait, am I going to his ship? That means doing…*that*, right? But we've only just met. I suppose I would be in worse trouble if he didn't save me, though.* If I stayed in the Third Division, more men like those thugs would eventually find me. Going with this guy seemed way better. At least he was nice.

"Chores? Are you saying she's your type or something?" The elf woman leaned in toward me. She was beautiful, with smooth, unblemished skin and the longest eyelashes I'd ever seen. It made my heart skip a beat.

"My type…? I mean, yeah, she's cute." The man who saved me looked to me again, but I quickly turned away. His eyes flickered down to my chest. Men often ended up looking there. I admit, my breasts often made my back hurt, but maybe this was one time I could be grateful for them.

"Actually, we shouldn't just stand around here and chat while she's in this state. Let's find a place to sit and calm down." Wow, he really was being kind. Suddenly, I felt embarrassed about the state he'd found me in, dirty and haggard like this. I hadn't managed to bathe in days.

"Fine, but you're paying," the elf said.

"Aye-aye, ma'am," he said. "Hey, let's go. We won't hurt you. If it hurts to walk, you can grab on to me." I obeyed his instructions and gently pinched his clothes. That was as close as I was willing to get. Any closer and he might get a whiff and I'd die from the shame.

At the café the elf told the man bluntly what me being on his ship implied. He blushed furiously. Was he actually a little stupid? Did he not realize what it meant to have a woman aboard? The sight of him all flustered over it was kind of adorable. But wait. If he was so clueless then he really wasn't trying to abduct me in the alleyway. He'd really saved me out of the goodness of his heart. How did someone so kind survive down here?

The rest of the afternoon passed in a blur. I learned his name was Hiro and the elf's was Elma. He took me to a government office, where he paid an enormous sum to the mean public servant. The massive debt hanging over me nearly made me faint, but Hiro…no, Master Hiro paid it off like it was nothing, all to buy my freedom. I had this overwhelming feeling that my whole life had been leading up to our meeting like this.

Later, Elma gave me a bag full of clothes. It was all thanks to her that I could be Master Hiro's. I owed him most of all, but she was a close second. Finally, Master Hiro took me back to his ship. It was surprising. I expected a mercenary ship to be more cramped and stuffy, but Master Hiro's was big and clean, like a First Division home. It might've been nicer than my old home.

I took a shower at Master Hiro's suggestion. After so long without one, it felt incredible to be under the warm water, and I scrubbed my skin clean of all the muck of the Third Division.

Then I checked out the bag of clothing Elma gave me earlier. It contained three pairs of panties, two sheer outfits, and one plainer outfit, as well as a skimpy negligee, bottle of liquid, two pill cases, and a note.

What's all this about? The note came from Elma and included instructions on how to use the bottle of liquid—perfume, apparently. That'd be helpful. I'd never used the stuff before. On to the pills. Elma said one was birth control and the other a medication to make the first time less painful. I'd heard stories that it could be uncomfortable, so I definitely appreciated that. I even had friends back at school who had to navigate some awkward conversations with their boyfriends after the first time.

I dabbed perfume onto my wrist. It made me feel mature and confident. Suddenly, the sheer outfits appealed to me way more than the plainer ones.

The moment Master Hiro saw me he blushed. Good, he was taking notice of me. I feared that even with all this he might still look at me like a little sister or a daughter, so it was a relief to see him react.

After a delicious meal, Master Hiro headed for the training room and then went to bed. I bided my time, waiting for the right moment before taking the two medicines and putting on the negligee. I wouldn't dare *charge* into Master Hiro's room, but when I approached, his door was open enough that I could peek inside.

He was in his underwear, his body exposed for me to see. Heat washed through me. Was this the work of the medicine?

"What's wrong?" he said. "Also, I'm half-naked. Gimme just a sec to get dressed."

When we locked eyes, he blushed and panicked. Spurred on by my instincts, I stepped into Master Hiro's room. It had taken a long time and a lot of pain for me to get here today, but finally I was safe in Master Hiro's embrace. I relaxed, content and happy in his arms.

Chapter 6:
A New Daily Life

MIMI'S MEDICINE worked like a charm. *The deed* went off without a hitch and by the end we were both resting, contented. Mimi passed out right away, understandably exhausted from the day's events. She lay next to me, breathing gently.

I, on the other hand, lay awake contemplating the future. Today was great, but I needed a plan, a goal of some sort. I couldn't just live for the sake of living.

It might be nice to get a real house on a nice planet somewhere. Not only might I be able to find my beloved soda in a situation like that, but maybe some day Mimi and I could call a place like that home. Maybe Mimi wouldn't stay with me forever, but whether with her or someone else, I did hope to have a family some day. Well, if I survived long enough.

And what about my previous life? I mean, sure, if I could, I'd love to go back home. But I had no idea how or why I was here, let alone how to get back. I didn't even know where to start. Besides, I had a pretty easy life here. I had a great ship, a job as a mercenary, and a decent amount of cash. I was doing pretty well for myself. Sure, I was a little homesick, but this was a whole new universe to explore—how exciting was that?

I mean, okay, I was kinda looking at only the positives. It's not like there were no downsides to being here. As a mercenary, I'd be toeing the line between life and death constantly. This wasn't a video game anymore; losing meant death. But losing wasn't even the only negative outcome. If the Krishna took a ton of damage in some battle, I'd have to find a way to pay for the repairs or face the prospect of fighting in sub-optimal condition. Even if I somehow never took damage, though, I'd need to constantly save up money for regular repair and maintenance. Slacking on that could mean dying just from neglecting something the ship needed.

The danger wasn't confined to space battles, though. Even just leaving the ship for food or any of the bureaucratic tasks that kept coming up could be dangerous, as I'd learned yesterday. This wasn't Japan; I

couldn't walk around assuming I was safe. All it would take was some random lowlife catching me by surprise and I'd be done for. Plus, if I went and got myself killed, Mimi would be stranded and in a tough spot herself.

"Hmm…" Knowing her safety was tied to my own was a heavy responsibility. I needed a plan. Maybe I could talk to that guy from the merc guild tomorrow or the day after.

After Mimi's vitals check tomorrow, we would go shopping. Everything had been too hectic to do the check today. Hopefully, nothing we'd done tonight would cause any blips. I couldn't know until tomorrow, so I decided to get some rest. In the morning, I would shower, eat, and then get to the vitals check. With a solid plan in place, I closed my eyes and finally relaxed, enjoying Mimi's warmth beside me. I would rest well tonight.

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"Mmuh?" Something tickled my chest, rousing me from my sleep. I cracked my eyes open to find brown hair splayed across my chest. "What are you doing?"

"Bwah?!" Mimi startled and looked up at me. I met her soft brown eyes, setting my hand over hers on my chest. Someone was being naughty.

"Hmm? And just what were you doing?" I teased.

"Huh? I-I'm just, umm…"

"It takes two to play this game, Mimi."

"Huh? Wha?"

I smirked and pulled her down to me. The morning wasted away while we flirted and played around, enjoying each other all over again.

"So, as for today's plans…" I said eventually. We couldn't just laze around forever, unfortunately.

"Yes?"

I told her the agenda over breakfast. We'd taken our time rolling out of bed this morning, but we weren't in any particular hurry.

After the meal, I did some basic chores to get things started. Still had plenty of cash. Good. We'd need that. The ship's self-assessment program reported everything in working order, too, so I didn't need to worry about maintenance at the moment.

Still, we couldn't just coast off that forever. I'd need to start making money soon, before there was any reason to panic or scramble. After breakfast, we would perform Mimi's vitals check and leave to shop for daily necessities. Along the way, we would get her a handheld terminal and take her to the mercenary guild, where I could ask about her training. If anyone would know about merc training, it'd be the guild.

"That's the basic to-do list," I said.

"Yes, sir. Understood."

"After we eat, we can rest for a bit. Then it's time for your vitals check."

"Yes, sir," Mimi said.

We snuck in another thirty minutes of lazing around before I took Mimi to the medical pod for her check. The results came back fine—some mild exhaustion, but no illnesses or anything more serious. We were both relieved by that. Being healthy counts for a lot.

"Okay, let's get going," I said. "Wear the least revealing clothes you have."

"Yes, sir," she said.

"Come to the cafeteria once you've changed." I was already dressed, so I waited while she went back to her room. Hmm, maybe at some point soon we'd need to talk about rules for living together here. We could tackle that later though.

"Sorry for making you wait," she said when she returned.

"Not at all," I said. "That was fast."

She laughed. "All I needed to do was change, after all."

I thought all girls took a long time to get dressed? Maybe she just didn't have the extras, like makeup. *I'd better buy her some.* We headed for the shops. First up, the drugstore. It had just about everything we needed:

snacks, candy, makeup, toiletries, even underwear. Oh, and medicine, of course.

"Okay, Mimi," I said. "I'm gonna let you handle the more *delicate* items you might need. A female employee might be able to help you better than me. Just let her know you're living on a ship now."

"Y-yes, sir," she answered.

"Listen up. Once you get on that ship and leave the colony, we won't be able to restock for months, maybe even half a year. Don't skimp or it'll actually cause more trouble for us. Just get whatever you might need."

"Yes, sir."

Hopefully she could handle it or an employee could help. I really wasn't an expert myself. I got some help from a different employee. After letting him know I was planning a long voyage, he recommended a first-aid kit and some medicines and materials to keep our medical pod well stocked. For myself, I grabbed underwear, shirts, and body wash. Finally, I'd need filters and disinfectants for the water circulation system back on the ship.

While I went over my purchase, Mimi returned. She was blushing, and the employee helping her was grinning about something. I distinctly didn't like where this was going.

"She's such a good girl. Have fun, you two!" the woman said.

Awkward silence descended after that proclamation. The moment I looked to Mimi she blushed and hid her face. Oh boy. I wasn't dumb. It was clear what she must have bought. Still, I had to ask. "Whatever it is, it's safe, right?" I asked. "No crazy side effects? Not addictive? She won't develop a dependence on it or anything?"

"Don't worry," the employee assured me. "I can vouch for its safety."

"Then it's all good. She needs it, right?"

"Yes. It makes her monthly cycle much lighter."

"I'll take your word on it." I was no expert, but I knew that a monthly cycle could be pretty painful, though it differed from person to person. Some women got it so bad they could barely do anything at all when it was at its worst. I'd even heard of pilots in this universe who made a mistake or crashed because of the pain. God, pain like that for days, maybe even a

week or more—it sounded awful. Hopefully whatever Mimi got would help her avoid that. The medicine in this universe was pretty advanced; surely it was up to the task.

"Thank you, come again!" the employee said as she rang up all our stuff.

I used my terminal to pay and finish the delivery procedures. By the time we returned to the ship, all our purchases would be waiting for us.

Next up was the handheld terminal for Mimi. It didn't take too long to find.

"Terminal and tablet," I said as I presented Mimi with both.

"Y-you bought two?" Her eyes flew wide.

"I wanted a tablet for myself, so three."

The terminal handled basic communication and wallet functions, while the tablet was for study, work, and entertainment. I planned to ask Mimi to train to become an operator, so she'd need a tablet of her own. She'd also be super helpful for managing my finances and all the bureaucracy with the guild and various governments.

We couldn't just work, though. That's why I got us both tablets with nice big screens we could use for videos, games, or whatever else we wanted.

"But they're so expensive," she said.

I understood her reluctance to drop that kind of money right away, but going cheap on necessary expenses usually ended up costing you more money in the long run. What if we were in the middle of space and discovered that these things couldn't do what we needed or broke easily?

Maybe shopping for clothes next would be best? I got what I needed at the drugstore, but Mimi needed somewhere a little nicer. It would be more efficient to split up and let her get her clothes while I dropped in at the guild, but it would also be more dangerous. Better to stick together.

We headed for the clothing store, hoping for a quick trip, but then—

I stalled in front of the storefront display, stunned into silence.

"What's the matter?" Mimi asked.

“Aren’t their outfits kind of…niche?” I said.

The mannequins in the display wore nurse uniforms, maid costumes, witch robes, bunny outfits, and more. Despite the little futuristic touches, it looked like a full-on cosplay shop—not that I was complaining.

“Really?” Mimi said. “I think they’re cute. Though they do look expensive.”

“Cute? Really?” I said.

“Yes?” Mimi seemed confused.

“Well, er… Whatever. Let’s go in.”

“Yes, sir.”

Despite the outward display, the shop was shockingly normal inside. Mimi buzzed with excitement. She didn’t seem put off by the weird costumes at all. I guess I’d have to go with the flow. Maybe cosplay was cutting edge fashion here.

“No way,” I muttered to myself. “This ain’t normal.”

“Hm…?” Mimi raised an eyebrow. Futuristic or not, the clothing on display here was definitely still cosplay.

Oh! Maybe the real clothing is invite-only? They must have normal options in the back. I mean, who in the world would walk around wearing this stuff? How is this place making money?!

“Welcome! How can I help you?” An employee appeared, wearing a smile and a high-tech rabbit-ear headband. Her whole uniform was a bunny suit, in fact.

“We’re here to buy her some clothes,” I said. “Uh… Do you have any normal, non-hobby clothes?”

“Yes, of course, sir.”

“Okay,” I said. “Mimi, go pick out some clothes and underwear with her. I’ll be, uh…”

“We have seats over here. Go on, don’t be shy!” the employee urged.

“Gotcha.”

“U-um…” Mimi hesitated.

“Don’t worry about the cost. Just buy what you need. Cool?”

“Yes, sir.” Mimi nodded. Good! That was much better than her being modest and missing out on something she needed.

“Aww, how sweet,” the employee said.

“Mimi here is learning to be a mercenary,” I said. “Or an operator, I guess. You know what I am based on my outfit, don’t you?”

“Are you a mercenary? Ooh, does that mean she’s on your ship with you?”

“Yup.”

“Oh ho ho…” The bunny girl looked back and forth between us. “Well! We have many things you might both like, from the modest to the sensual. Good job bagging her, buddy!”

“Can you just find something that looks merc-ish, maybe like an operator? The rest is up to her.”

“Yes, sir! Come, dear. Right this way!” She took Mimi’s hand.

“Huh? Oh, okay!”

They vanished into the back of the shop.

“Welp.” I was in for a long wait. Unfortunately, I couldn’t entertain myself by wandering around. They only had women’s clothing here, so I’d look weird as hell prowling around through it. Instead, I pulled out my terminal and started writing a message to Elma.

You really stirred up trouble, I wrote.

It helped you, didn’t it? Sheltered rich boys like you never make a move. Damn, her reply was quick! Was she that bored? Actually, she’d mentioned the galactic police killing some space pirates. Maybe she was stuck on standby. *So, did you smash?*

Please don’t say “smash.” But yes, we did.

If you said you didn’t smash, I’d come and smack you in the face right now.

Ooh, scary. Elma’s next message was a sticker of a cat punching a mouse. What a way to learn that the texting app had stickers.

So what? she wrote. *Did you text me just to complain?*

No, I wrote. *I'm thinking of training Mimi to be an operator. I wanted to ask if the guild has any materials. You know, manuals, training apps, whatever.*

Ask the guild, not me. But yeah, they should have stuff like that.

Do they? And would I have to go to the guild to get it?

I don't know! All I've heard is that the merc training org that runs the guild has training stuff. Go there and ask them yourself.

Aye-aye, ma'am. I sent her a sticker with a penguin saluting. I kept texting with Elma while I waited, telling her about the vitals check and the shopping and all. Finally, Mimi and the employee returned. Neither of them carried any bags, so I figured the purchases must be on their way to the ship.

"Done?" I asked.

"Y-yes!" Mimi said. The bunny girl employee wore a positively diabolical grin. *That's not reassuring…*

"What's the damage?" I said.

"Your total is right here!" The bunny girl held out a tablet, which showed Mimi wearing a high-tech bunny suit. This application seemed to combine her bodily data with the clothes, giving a preview of what she would look like if she wore them.

Yeah, Mimi's chest was downright dangerous. She was practically falling out of that little bunny suit, especially at the top. Oh boy.

"Oopsie! You weren't supposed to see that."

"You'd better delete that data," I said.

The bunny girl nodded gleefully. Then she leaned in and whispered, "If you register as a member, we can recommend the perfect clothes by comparing her data with sister stores. If you're interested, we have online ordering and new product alerts."

"Does it include that clothing preview software?"

"Of course! This is all made possible with our exclusive app."

“Sold.” I registered as a member while I paid. It was not a cheap prospect. But hey, compared to flak shrapnel and my other ammo, it wasn’t really gonna make a dent in the finances.

With all that settled, we headed at last for the mercenary guild.

“Just so you know, the guy who works at the guild is kind of terrifying,” I said while we walked. “He looks exactly like what you’d imagine for a merc guild.”

“O-okay,” she replied.

“He’s a nice enough guy, once you get to know him. That place is like a government office, so you don’t have to be nervous.”

“Yes, sir!”

Her expression changed from fear to delight on a dime. Adorable. Still, she probably needed to learn self-defense to survive around here. Maybe even carry a weapon. I’d have to ask the merc guild guy what he’d recommend.

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“That didn’t take you long, huh?” The receptionist frowned upon noticing Mimi peeking out from behind me.

“Hey, listen, a lot happened,” I said. “Either way, she’s staying on my ship now and I was hoping she could train to be an operator. Do you have documents or training manuals, maybe even an app, that might help train her?”

“I-I’d really appreciate it,” Mimi added.

The receptionist lunged around the counter, grabbing me by the collar all of a sudden.

“What’s going on here?” he demanded.

“I’ll tell you all about what happened, just let me go. You’re scary this close up.”

“Watch it,” he snarled.

“But it’s true! Look, Mimi’s trembling, too!”

“Urk!” The man shoved me away, sat down, closed his eyes, and took deep breaths to calm himself. He wasn’t the only one. I needed a few deep breaths myself.

“It’s a long story, just so you know,” I warned him.

“I’ve got time.”

“Okay…”

He clearly wasn’t going to take no for an answer—and I definitely didn’t want to be on his bad side—so I settled in and told him the whole sorry tale.

“This is unfair!” he growled. “You meet a girl your first day of mercenary work and I still can’t get a girl myself! Wanna guess how long I’ve been doing this? Fifteen years! Am I doomed to eternal loneliness?!” Abruptly, his anger shifted to despair as he cried at the heavens and fell onto his desk, weeping into his arms.

The commotion summoned a different employee, who came running at the sound of the receptionist’s wailing. She grabbed him and bodily hauled him off to the back as soon as she saw him. *Well, see ya, I guess.*

“Excuse my coworker’s rudeness.” After cleaning the receptionist’s tears from the front desk, the woman smiled awkwardly at us. I couldn’t blame her. Who wouldn’t feel awkward in that position?

“So, uh, should I tell the whole story again?” I said.

“If you wouldn’t mind, yes. You may spare the details, though.” The woman bowed deeply, and I gave her a summary of events. “I see. Then you require a passenger registration for her, along with materials for operator training.”

“Guess so,” I said.

“I-if you’d please,” Mimi added.

This woman proved far more efficient than her coworker. In no time she completed the paperwork and handed us educational materials to install on Mimi’s tablet. The program looked pretty high-tech. An AI would teach

Mimi everything she needed to know, and an additional app would help compile things like ship status and finances all in one place.

"An information gathering and display application is included," the new receptionist said. "Be sure to learn it like the back of your hand."

"Y-yes, ma'am," Mimi replied.

"You'll be a real help if you can learn procedures and all that stuff, Mimi. Do your best," I encouraged her.

"Understood!" Mimi exhaled triumphantly, her newly powered-up tablet in hand. Together, we might just make it. This universe was full of complex procedures that the game mercifully omitted, so hopefully Mimi could handle that while I focused on piloting.

"Oh, right," I remembered. "I was also hoping she could learn self-defense or how to use a weapon."

"Hmm, that would be difficult," the new receptionist explained. "It's impossible to learn self-defense overnight. Same goes for learning to use a weapon."

"Really?"

"Yes, really. However, whether she can use it or not, just carrying a gun might work. The threat of the weapon itself will help keep ne'er-do-wells away."

"I see."

"Should I prepare one for you?" she offered.

"That would be great."

Did the mercenary guilds handle weapons, too? Come to think of it, I hadn't seen a weapon shop in all my time here. Seemed the mercenary guilds and government organizations handled all that. Mimi got to test out a laser gun in the shooting range before we left. It was… Well, let's put it this way: It'd probably help if she kept her eyes open when she took a shot.

Chapter 7:
Large-Scale Extermination

WE RETURNED to the ship and resolved to spend a few days resting up. Mimi's time on the streets had been tough on her, and she needed more time to recover. Fortunately, we weren't in any rush to make money, so we could afford the extra time.

This also gave me time to dig into that space pirate crackdown Elma had mentioned. Attacking a pirate hideout likely meant a massive battle—with massive rewards. When I played *Stella Online*, an event like that meant a potentially huge payout, depending on the number of enemy ships you destroyed. Accepting a smaller job sooner could mean missing out on a big payday, so it was better to wait.

In the meantime, most days I'd wake up, work out, shower, and then join Mimi for a bit while she worked on her studies to become an operator. Turned out her training materials had some good tips for me as well.

After the study session, I'd gather intel online, text with Elma, and maybe fit in a little playful flirting with Mimi.

This went on for a few days until, finally, the galactic police and mercenary guild announced the start of the pirate-subjugation mission.

"I love how we can get this briefing in the ship instead of having to leave for some big gathering or something," I said, impressed.

"Me too," Mimi said.

I sat in the pilot's seat with Mimi behind me in the operator's seat while we waited for the briefing to begin. It really was convenient getting to stay here instead of having to go to the galactic police's base for instructions. It was like a shut-in's dream habitat; I could even order food right to the ship's cargo.

The cockpit pinged. The screen lit up, several popups appearing. Each displayed a different person, along with their affiliations and ships. I saw Elma in one corner, as well as Serena, the military woman I'd met at my interrogation.

“Ah?!” When I made eye contact with Serena, I shuddered. Why in the world was she here? An ominous feeling settled in my gut. *Maybe I ought to be careful around her.*

Serena’s window grew larger and moved to the middle of the screen as she spoke. “Let us begin the briefing now. You know me as Lieutenant Serena Holz. I am the commander of this operation. You may call me Lieutenant Serena.”

“Understood, Lieutenant Serena,” everyone said.

“Now,” she said, “an explanation of the operation. It is not especially complex. The space pirates’ base is in the Gamma Sector of the asteroid belt.” A map of the star system appeared onscreen to accompany Lieutenant Serena’s explanation. Part of the asteroid belt was highlighted in red. “Again, the mission is simple. The galactic police’s armada will head there and destroy the enemy base. They are *merely* space pirates; their resistance will be futile. It will not take long.”

The mercenaries nodded or murmured their agreement. Space pirates’ pathetic ships couldn’t possibly resist the heavy cruisers and battleships the galactic police controlled. The firepower, shields, and armor didn’t even compare. Mercenary ships could occasionally take on galactic police under specific circumstances, but definitely not alone. On top of that, the galactic police had a whole armada of ships, all piloted by folks with extensive training. The space pirates wouldn’t stand a chance.

“As you all know, the police’s attack will be overwhelming but imprecise,” Serena said. “They will destroy any ships that come their way, but some small and medium-sized ships will no doubt escape. That’s where you come in, mercenaries.”

Destroying large ships and their base would devastate the pirates, but their main forces were high-speed medium and small craft. If those got away, they could rebuild and cause trouble again. Hence sending out the mercenaries to mop up the remnants. You could look at it like cleanup, but in reality we were killing off their main forces. Either way, all that mattered to me was getting paid.

“How about the rewards?” one mercenary asked, reading my mind.

“Zero advance payment,” Lieutenant Serena replied. “Upon completion of the mission, you will receive 50,000 Ener.”

Wow, that was stingy. Okay, well, maybe the reward per ship would be a little better than the base rate.

“That comes with an additional 5,000 Ener for each small ship destroyed and 20,000 Ener for each medium-sized ship,” Serena said. “Naturally, you’ll also get the bounty for each ship and rights to whatever they’re carrying. And of course, we plan to destroy the large craft ourselves.” Serena grinned. The mercenaries murmured, but it seemed their concerns were allayed.

“The strategy itself is simple, as well,” Serena said. “All mercenaries will meet in the Gamma Sector and hide. The galactic police’s fleet will attack head-on and destroy the pirates’ base and large craft. When small and medium craft scramble to escape, you will ambush them. Take down anyone who tries to slip away.”

Simple or not, it sounded effective. The opening blast would destroy the most threatening enemies, and the mercenaries would cast a wide net to capture the rest. While the enemy panicked, the police would turn that net into a cage. The trap would get smaller and smaller until we obliterated every last one of the space pirates.

A tug on my sleeve. I looked away for a moment to find Mimi beside me peeking at the briefing. “Master Hiro,” she said, “won’t the space pirates activate faster-than-light travel to escape?”

“No worries there,” I said. “If all the ships in an area don’t launch FTL at once, the safety measures in the ship won’t let you activate it.”

“But could they disable the safety measures and activate it by force?”

“They could, but I doubt anyone would. When you disable that, you run into a ton of space debris and asteroids that your shields can’t block. The moment you activate FTL, you’re done for. Or so I’ve heard; I wouldn’t know myself.”

“I see.”

I knew from my gaming experience that the safety measures and evasion systems were interlocked, but I didn’t know exactly why. All the

super-futuristic stuff was left vague, for obvious reasons. Players didn't need to know all the technical details in order to use the gadgets and devices available in the game, just like no one back home needed to know how a microwave or cell phone worked to operate it.

While I was answering Mimi's questions, the other mercenaries quizzed Serena. Most of them wanted to know more about how and what we'd be paid, but I didn't care as much about that. For example, they asked how the reward would be divvied up if multiple mercenaries brought down the same ship. Apparently, those decisions would come down to the police, who'd weight it based on the logs and then publicize the results through the guilds for the sake of transparency.

That was smart. Guilds hated mercs who stole kills just to cash in. A mercenary could get demoted or even expelled for kill stealing. Not that I planned to do anything like that.

Nobody was asking anything I really wanted to know, though. Finally, I had to jump in myself.

"Can I ask a question?"

All eyes turned toward me, including Elma's. The poor little space elf glared as though bracing for whatever stupid question I might ask. Well, it wouldn't do to disappoint her on that front.

"Yes," Serena said. "Go right ahead."

"I've never participated in a large-scale battle like this, but I imagine there are times when someone might decide they're unable to fight due to issues with their ship, losing their shields, depleting the shield cells that would restore their shields, or a number of other complications. Are we allowed to leave at will in such situations?"

The other mercenaries were astounded. Elma covered her face in embarrassment, while Serena smiled and said, "You are absolutely free to do as you please. A mercenary can't work if they're dead. But don't run for the hills without at least fighting a little; remember, we do need to kill *all* of the space pirates."

"That makes sense. Rookie as I am, I just wanted to make sure that retreat was an option. I'd have to back out if you said that we fight until we die."

“Er, do you think we would do that?” Serena said.

“Less that you *would* do it, more that you *could* do it. I have a crew to think about, so I need to know this stuff.”

Lieutenant Serena laughed. “Ha ha, fair enough. Yes, we could do it, but you don’t need to worry. We wouldn’t do such a thing.”

“I appreciate you making that clear,” I said. “No more questions from me, ma’am.”

Some of the mercenaries were smirking at me now. A few just blinked at me in amazement or curiosity. A good 50 percent of the assembled mercs didn’t seem to care whatsoever.

“Do we have any other questions?” Serena said. “If not, we will begin in one hour. As soon as you’re prepared, depart from the hangar bay and wait on standby.”

“Understood,” we all replied. Briefing complete. Now, it was time for the battle phase.

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“Hey, are you okay?” I asked.

“I-I-I’m okay, yes, s-s-sir,” Mimi said.

“You don’t seem okay.”

Did I say battle phase? Well, I lied. We still had an hour to wait. I ordered the ship’s AI to do a self-check and some automatic maintenance, and took Mimi to the cafeteria to help her calm down.

“N-n-nothing’s wrong,” she said.

“It’s very obvious that something is wrong.”

Mimi was like some terrified newborn fawn. Not that I blamed her. We were about to face a real, life-or-death battle. Her reaction was totally normal; mine was not. Unlike Mimi, I felt no fear at all.

I should have been scared too, right? Yet I wasn't. I mean, first of all, the Krishna was one of the best mercenary ships in this universe. I'd compared its data to other ships on the market, and they didn't even come close in terms of abilities, weapons, and outfitting. I could even outclass the galactic police around here. Maybe something in the Grakkan Empire or Belbellum Federation, some large battleship or something, would outshine my beloved Krishna, but here, today, I had the utmost confidence.

Secondly, I had firsthand experience of how much stronger I was than the space pirates around here. Those three pirates I'd taken out had reacted just like Elma and the merc guild receptionists—totally shocked. The Hiro-Krishna combo inspired fear and awe in everyone who witnessed it. It wasn't just that the Krishna was strong; without a good pilot, all that strength was wasted. It was that together we were a truly formidable team.

With all that in mind, I just couldn't feel intimidated by this little extermination mission. It didn't feel like my life was actually in danger. Plus, some part of me still saw this all as part of *Stella Online*. It didn't feel real. How could I possibly fear dying when it was still just a video game to me? Even in the game I'd only died a few times, and mostly when I was new. I knew intellectually that this mission was dangerous, but I couldn't really buy into it. Honestly, the biggest downside to dying in the game was simply having to pay to repair your ship or buy a new one. Insurance could make it a little cheaper, but you'd still lose all your cargo. I'd always worked with a little safety net in my finances just for that reason, not to mention three layers of shields and armor to protect the ship itself.

Even if someone got through all that armor, they'd have to contend with the ship itself, which carried cells that could recharge the shields in an emergency. The Krishna came loaded with five shield cells. As long as they worked as intended, the ship would be completely safe. My strategy in the game had always been to retreat when I hit my last shield cell. One was plenty to ensure a safe escape.

Of course, escape itself was a tricky maneuver. You couldn't just run away in a straight line. You'd be way too easy to shoot that way. By throwing on the thrusters and putting up your shields, though, you could speed away from an enemy diverting its power toward weapons systems.

"Excuse me, Master Hiro?" Mimi said.

“Hm? Oh, sorry. I’m just thinking.” I shook off my errant thoughts and smiled at her. “You don’t need to worry about me. I’ve got skills, and the Krishna’s got power. Besides, didn’t you hear what Serena said? If it gets dicey, we can run. I work with a hefty margin of safety in that regard. I won’t push my luck.”

“I-I’m okay, honestly.”

“Try convincing me of that when you’re not all pale,” I said. “I think we just have to get you used to it. Oh, just so you know, you should avoid eating too much for a while. It could get bumpy out there, and things will get real messy if you throw up.”

“O-oh. I-I’ll remember that.”

I hoped she’d be okay. If this were Elma, that’d be one thing, but I didn’t want poor Mimi getting sick everywhere. Plus, I wasn’t really sure if vomit could get into the machinery and cause some sort of malfunction.

“The self-check should be done soon,” I said. “If you’re scared, you could stay in the colony. I’m sure the mercenary guild wouldn’t turn you away.”

“N-no, I want to come!” she said. “How will we travel together if I run from the first battle?” Mimi clenched her fists and pumped them into the air, making her chest bounce just slightly. She was wearing her merc gear today: tight shorts and a heavyweight shirt with a jacket over it. She still looked a little out of place like this, but hopefully she’d grow into the merc look (and life) over time.

With Mimi’s mind made up, we headed for the cockpit to prepare for takeoff. Krishna finished its self-check: green across the board. We were good to go.

“Mimi, I’m going to take off,” I said. “Contact the control tower.”

“Y-yes, sir!” In the operator seat, Mimi fumbled with the communications console before getting us ready for launch procedures. A launch time flashed on the screen. We both sat back to wait. Unlike landing, the AI would handle takeoff on its own.

The countdown hit zero. The ship’s generator rumbled to life, propelling us out of the hangar bay. The landing gear retracted, and we shot

out of Tarmein Prime and into the endless expanse of space.

"Whooooa…" Mimi sighed.

"Space really is beautiful," I said. "No matter where you look, it's stars as far as the eye can see."

"I had no idea that the colony looked like that," she said.

"It's like a bicycle tire," I said.

"Bi…cycle?"

"Oh, yeah. Uh, it's just a vehicle with tires shaped like that."

"Goodness, really?"

Mimi seemed totally mystified by bicycles. Did this universe not have them? I couldn't imagine why. They were environmentally friendly and convenient. Maybe the artificial gravity made them too difficult to ride? I had no idea. Another mystery for later.

I checked our sensors and flew us over to where some of the other mercs were already waiting. No two ships in this hodgepodge cleanup crew were the same. Some were technically the same model, but they'd been customized so much that they barely resembled each other anymore.

"Wow!" Mimi exclaimed. "Those ships are so colorful."

"I guess some people like to stand out. Maybe they're confident in their skills or just hoping to stand out to future clients."

My Krishna, on the other hand, was painted a dark blue that helped camouflage it and reduce its luster. I certainly could have chosen something flashier. *Stella Online* gave players a lot of freedom in that regard. You could even slap anime characters all over your ship, like a futuristic *itasha*. That style wasn't for me, though.

"Hoo, boy! That's a rare one," I said.

One white ship in particular stood out from the pack. It was elegant and streamlined, almost swan-like with its sleek lines and rear-mounted thrusters. The whole effect was decidedly fast, deadly, and beautiful. If any ship looked like the hero of this mission, it was that one.

It wasn't just looks, though. I knew a bit about this ship, the SSC 16 Galactic Swan, if my guess was correct. High mobility, strong shields, and

above average personnel capacity. In *Stella Online*, most players called it the White Comet (because it streaked through the heavens like a shooting star), the Ferrari (because it was ridiculously fast), and the Crazy Train (to Hell), besides other nicknames. It was a legend among *Stella Online* ships.

"That ship is gorgeous!" Mimi said.

"Heh, yeah, it is," I said.

"Hm? What's so funny?"

"Well, the thing is…"

The ship's specifications alone were fantastic, but it had one problem: operability. It was *too* good at going fast. Its ridiculous speed limited it to charging straight ahead. Complex movements were downright impossible. An acquaintance once let me pilot one, and I couldn't even begin to control it.

And it wasn't cheap, either. The materials required to build a ship like came at a high price. You wouldn't just pay up front, either. Every little repair could drain your savings to nothing. Medium-sized craft; battleship-sized costs.

There was one more downside to that crazy ship: it could rampage. That didn't mean simply plowing through enemies. No, it literally rampaged, bucking the pilot's attempts to control it, dashing around at crazy speeds until it depleted all its fuel. Then, it would explode. Something like that had to be a bug, right? That's what we all thought, too, but some crazy testers—I mean that as a compliment, by the way—got deep enough into the game's code to figure out the rampage was a hidden feature. Can you believe that?

Honestly, it became a meme ship among *Stella Online* players due to its awful rampage function, difficult controls, and eye-popping costs. I could hardly believe that any mercenary would bring it to a life-or-death battle. But maybe it was a good ship in the right hands? It far surpassed my Krishna in speed and mobility, but it was a major nuisance to everyone around it. That was a bit of a blow to its viability.

"Is it worthless, then?" Mimi asked.

“Not at all,” I said. “If you can use it well, it’s a strong ship. It’s just so hard to handle, and…frankly, it’s kinda defective.”

“Defective how?”

“Under certain conditions, it goes on a high-speed rampage and explodes. Though, as long as you’re careful to avoid going *too* wild in battle and abusing high-temperature laser weapons, that won’t happen.”

“Isn’t that rather dangerous?” Mimi said.

“It’s very dangerous. The only people who use that ship are quirky veterans and idiots who only pick ships based on their stats.”

“How interesting.”

I tapped the ship’s details, trying to figure out who was crazy enough to pilot that thing, and found its owners name was…Captain Elma. “Oh.”

“What’s the matter?” Mimi said.

“That’s Elma’s ship,” I said.

“Huh?!”

“She does fancy herself a veteran. Uh, she’s probably fine, though.”

As long as the ship wasn’t kitted with full laser weapons, it shouldn’t go on a rampage. Hopefully, at least.

Probably.

Okay, I had to stop lying to myself. A meme ship coming up at a time like this? And Elma of all people was piloting it? Nope, there were just too many red flags here. “Let’s just pray she makes it out,” I said. “It’s your first battle, after all.”

“Y-yes, sir. I imagine Elma can handle herself,” Mimi said.

No one wanted to see someone they knew die in battle, but in our line of work it was bound to happen eventually. The moment you got in a ship and flew off into space, you accepted the risks that came along with that. I’d help Elma as much as I could, but there was only so much I could accomplish in that regard. For the time being, with the battle not even started, the best I could do was pray.

“We will begin in thirty minutes,” Lieutenant Serena announced. “All ships will receive coordinates where you’ll remain in hiding. Once the battle begins, move to said coordinates.”

An operator from the galactic police assigned us hiding spots and sent the coordinates. The enemy’s forces were positioned very…carefully, as if they had sent out recon drones.

“Huh. What in the…?” I raised an eyebrow.

“Is something wrong?” Mimi asked.

“This just looks a little off. Don’t worry about it.” They’d assigned me a spot dense with enemy forces. Were these assignments random, or…? Lieutenant Serena’s smile flashed in my mind. I couldn’t help but feel like this was intentional.

Fine. Bring it on. If the going got rough, I could just get going. Though I didn’t think I’d need to.

***

“Confirm synchronization of ally ships,” I ordered.

“Synchronization confirmed,” Mimi replied.

“Initiate faster-than-light charge.”

“Faster-than-light charge initiation confirmed. Charge completed. Countdown to activation: five, four, three, two… Faster-than-light travel initiated.”

With a boom like a clap of thunder, the faster-than-light drive activated. With the whole allied fleet synced up, all I had to do now was make sure no one was being completely stupid, and we could coast along.

It looked like Elma wasn’t assigned to the same location as us. Bummer. I prayed for her safety in the battle, but I’d only find out later.

“So,” I began, “we’re going into battle now.”

“Sir!”

“In battle, I’m going to have you monitor the radar and handle communications.”

“Understood!”

“Remind me, what does radar monitoring entail?” I quizzed.

“Sir! I must be aware of both enemy and allied movements on the radar and inform the helmsman if there is danger!”

“Good. How about communications?”

“Sir! I must intercept enemy and allied communications, gathering intelligence and responding to messages sent to our ship!”

“Looks like we’ll be just fine,” I said. “When I was alone, I had to do all that on my own, but with you here I can focus more on just piloting. It’ll be a big help. You’ve got a long way to go, but keep up the hard work.”

“Yes, sir! You can trust me!” Mimi responded.

“Good. Glad to hear it.”

During faster-than-light travel, I gave my ship one last, quick once-over. The four heavy lasers on the arms would serve as the main weapons, but I also had two flak canons for sub-weapons.

And one other thing: my two trump cards. I only had two shots each for those, four shots total, and their ammo came at a hefty price. Ideally, I wouldn’t need them at all, but they were there if the situation turned dire. Besides, what kind of fool dies without even using their trump card?

“It’s beautiful,” Mimi mused, watching the scenery outside the ship.

She was right. Our high speed blurred the stars into streaking comets. Distant nebulae glittered green and orange like jewels. Even though I’d seen this all before, I was just as dazzled as Mimi.

“That it is,” I said. “Seeing outer space like this is a privilege only travelers like us get to enjoy.”

“Yes, sir.”

After a few minutes of FTL travel, we arrived at our coordinates.

“Exiting faster-than-light travel,” I warned. “Brace for impact and turbulence.”

“Okay.”

I turned off the FTL drive and shifted to regular travel. The Krishna returned to normal space with a thunderous boom. Then we followed the other mercenary ships to our assigned hiding spot.

“Here’s where we hide in ambush,” I said.

“It’s very quiet,” Mimi said.

“Space is a quiet, lonely place. Though I’m not lonely, since I have you with me.”

“Hee hee!” she giggled. “Then I’m not lonely, either.”

During our idle chatter, I lowered the main generator to minimum output.

“Are you cold?” I said.

“I’m fine,” she said. The cockpit cooled as power decreased to all systems, including the life support. I was dressed warmly, but Mimi just had those shorts and a jacket.

“I may be lightly dressed, but these clothes are made from a warm material,” she said.

“Is that so?” I said. “I was worried at first, but I guess that shop knows their stuff.”

“Agreed.”

It truly was refreshing to see this cute girl showing off her new clothes every day. Over the past few days, Mimi had treated me to the sight of several different futuristic cosplays. I especially enjoyed the short-stack maid one.

Streaks of light interrupted my daydreaming. Rays pierced the empty space before us. An instant later, intercepted comms from the space pirates crackled over our speakers.

“Wh-what the hell was that?!”

“Michael’s down! Attack—gaaaaah?!”

“It’s a police raid!”

“They’re aiming for the base and our large ships! Gaaah, there’s fire everywhere! Lock down bulkheads three and seven immediately!”

“We’ve got guys in there!”

“Shit-for-brains! If you don’t lock them down, we’re *all* dead! Do it!”

All hell broke loose. While the pirates panicked, the police’s battleships and heavy cruisers bombarded their base and large craft. Even my Krishna couldn’t launch an attack that intense. The battleships’ cannons put the mercenary ships to shame in both firepower and range. Their close-range firepower was no joke, either. If you charged in head-on like an idiot, they would fill you with holes before you could get close.

“It’s too much! Everyone, run for your lives!”

“Retreat! Retreat! Retreat!”

“Dammit! We’re gonna lose all the loot we snatched!”

Ooh, time for them to run away. A couple of the pirates plunged into the police fleet, but none lasted long. What did they expect? Those were police ships arrayed in an orderly battle line. No one could dive into that and really expect to survive.

Allied communications flooded in. “Communication prohibition lifted! Commence operation!”

“Go, go, go!”

“Don’t let a single ship escape!”

“Woo-hoo! We’ve got our pick of prey!” With the signal given, I punched Krishna’s main generator up to max output. “Mimi, we’re going into battle! Brace yourself for impact and high g-forces!”

“Y-yes, siiir!”

I launched us forward. The g-forces slammed me back in my seat as adrenaline flooded my body. I booted my weapons system and deployed the arms and flak cannons. Now, we were ready to fight—and it looked like we already had our first customer. Four pirates faced us.

“Unknown ship up ahead! What is that…? It’s got *arms* coming out of it!”

“I’ve never seen a ship like that! Watch out!”

“It’s coming head-on! Shoot ’em full of holes!”

“We’ve got the numerical advantage. Break those shields, surround him, and fire away!”

Two of the pirates were general-purpose small craft, while the other two were battle ready. They flew right for me as I approached, readying their weapons.

“Trying to take on the Krishna with small craft? That’s not gonna work out for you guys.”

I trained the sights of my four heavy lasers on one of the small battle-ready ships, while aiming my flak cannons at the other. The enemies wanted to focus their fire on me, but their lasers had much shorter range than my Krishna’s heavy lasers.

“Whoa?! My shields!”

My first shot tore through a pirate’s shields. The second pierced the ship itself, tearing it apart in swipes of bright laser light.

“This guy’s bad news! Run, ruuun!” My second target did his best to retreat, but it was too late. His ship’s exposed flank took the brunt of two flak blasts. Shrapnel saturated the ship’s shields and mercilessly tore holes into it. Instant Swiss cheese! There was a heavy beat of silence, and then the second ship exploded in a shower of red.

“Gaaah! H-he’s a monster!”

“R-run…”

The two general-purpose craft tried to escape, but they weren’t built for fighting; they had no hope of outrunning a battleship. Meanwhile, the Krishna was crafted for pure speed.

“D-damn, he’s fast! We can’t shake him off!”

“No, no, no! I can’t die here!”

“Well, you will,” I said. “I gotta kill pirates, sorry. No mercy.”

They tried to scatter, but I wasn’t about to let them off that easy. They were pirates; if they got away, they’d just go on and hurt more people. I rushed to the fleeing ships and dropped both of them with one heavy laser each. Before I chased my next marks, I glanced over at Mimi and caught

her quivering. She seemed to be looking at the radar, but I couldn't tell if she actually *saw* it. Well, this was her first voyage. I couldn't really blame her.

I turned away for now. A flood of light greeted me, crisscrossing through space. Laser canons, tracer bullets, missile exhaust, explosions: it lit up the darkness like some crazy fireworks display. The beauty masked the deadly intent behind every flare of light. Laser cannons could vaporize humans and not even leave a trace. The huge artillery mounted on battleships easily made men into mincemeat. Missiles blasted through ships, tossing people into the dark clutches of space.

What about escape pods? you might ask. Someone could try to launch away using their cockpit as an escape pod, but in the middle of a battle they wouldn't get far unless they were extraordinarily lucky.

"Mimi, we're off to the next battle," I said.

"Ulp…?! S-sir!" Mimi sat up, jolted back to her senses. Nerves strained her normally cheery voice. Clearly it would take a while before she got used to this.

"Tch, there's too many!" our allies shouted over the comms. Their cry was followed by the shouts of our enemies:

"Surround, surround! Besso, hold 'em back!"

"Gotcha, boss!"

"Damn yooou!" Five pirate ships cornered a single merc. He might hold out simply by having the better ship, but the situation was getting dire. Eventually his shields and armor would fall, and that would be it.

Unless I got involved.

The cornered merc's call sign was Quiet. I tried my best to reach him.

"This is Captain Hiro speaking, call sign Krishna. Quiet, I'm coming to back you up."

"Aw, man! You're savin' my ass here!"

"Grr, there's another!" the pirates snarled. "Lang, Kamar! Hold him back!"

"Yeah, boss!"

“We got this!”

Two of the five ships broke off to intercept me. At a glance, they looked like one battleship and one carrier-ship-turned-missile-support. A missile-support craft could be seriously annoying. Those missiles were not only destructive but also very hard to dodge. Quiet must have been a skilled pilot to survive with its sights set on him.

“Use the seekers!” a pirate commanded.

“Gotcha!”

Shoot. “Seekers” probably meant heat-seeking missiles—low range, but well suited to ambushes because of how they could lock on. The pirates launched two right at me.

I gotta say, shooting them directly at me and *announcing it beforehand kinda spoils the surprise.*

I had two choices now: evade or confuse with stronger heat sources. I decided to take the *third* option.

The ship shook from the recoil of my fire, rattling me to my core. The seeker missiles both exploded. I burst through the flare of fire at maximum speed and closed in on a general-purpose ship.

“Eugh! He forced his way through!” one pirate yelled.

“One,” was my only response.

As I passed the missile-support ship, I destroyed it with some point-blank flak. My shrapnel must have triggered the missiles stocked on the ship because the whole craft detonated as I zipped past.

“Wha?!”

“Two,” I said.

My altitude-control thrusters pushed me through a tight turn. I fired all four heavy lasers at the battleship.

As expected, the shields blinked out from the barrage of laser fire. Now defenseless, I destroyed the ship with a couple of precise shots right through the hull. Then I checked the radar to see how Quiet was doing. He had destroyed one of his three ships and cornered another. Definitely a skilled pilot.

“I’ll take care of the last one,” I told him.

“Thanks, bud.”

“Wha?! Dammit!” a pirate screamed. “This wasn’t supposed to happen!”

“R-Raizo, what do we do?!”

“Shut up! All we can do is smack these shits down and bail on this!” I had to wonder why they didn’t just accept their doom and self-destruct. I took out one ship attempting to flee while Quiet destroyed their leader’s ship. And it barely took us any time at all.

“You saved my ass, Krishna,” Quiet thanked me. “Five ships are just too many to handle.”

“Hey, no problem, man,” I said. “I got to enjoy some tasty prey. Good luck out there.”

“Yeah, man. Be careful out there.” Quiet retreated, probably planning to do some emergency repairs and recover his shields.

I paused long enough to pilfer the valuables from the pirates’ ships before moving to my next mark.

“Mimi, how’s the battle at large look?” I inquired.

“Huh?” She jumped. “Ah, um…it looks like things are going well for us.”

“Can you see any places where our people are having trouble?”

“Umm… Sorry. No.”

“Fair enough. I’m going mostly by instinct, myself. Just think of the mercs as three or four times stronger than these pirates. If you see anyone outnumbered more than that, let me know. One-on-one battles might be worth intervening in also.”

“I see. Um… Okay, what about this spot down and to the left of us? It’s close to the galactic police, but they have three medium-sized craft there, and it looks like our guys are struggling.”

I pointed my ship in the direction Mimi indicated and checked for myself. She was right. We were definitely at a disadvantage. Just four mercenaries faced down twenty small craft and three medium craft from the

pirates. They were putting up a good fight, but it would be difficult to keep that going for long.

"Okay, let's intervene. Mimi, I'm going to keep an eye out, but I want your eyes fixed on the radar so we don't get ambushed. Also, let them know that we're on our way."

"Y-yes, sir! I'll do my best!"

I checked out the firepower the three medium crafts were carrying as we raced to the rescue. Looked like souped-up private transport ships with multi-cannons for close-range and medium lasers for support fire, as well as some defensive multi-cannons—probably automatic turrets.

None of this was too unusual for pirates, who frequently destroyed a ship's thrusters, seized it, and ejected all the personnel. In a situation like that, pirates would strip down the mercenary or merchant ships and turn them into improvised support ships. I'd learned all that in *Stella Online*, but it looked like it still held true here. These improvised ships would likely have deadly weapons pointed forward, up, left, and right, but have clear blind spots below and behind them. I had little doubt the Krishna's large capacity shield erector could absorb their fire easily, but there was no reason to bum rush them right from the start. Most transport ships had a cargo space on the lower deck, one the pirates likely hadn't fitted with extra armor after seizing the craft. That was my target.

I lowered my ship's generator output, took my weapons system offline, and began emergency cooling. "It's gonna get a little cold, but bear with me," I said.

"O-of course. What's the plan?"

"Charging in head-on isn't how we mercs fight," I said. "We're going to try something a little more subtle."

As the ship cooled, so did the cockpit. After three minutes, I could see my breath. I spared a glance for Mimi, but her outfit was apparently *really* good at fending off the cold. Even with her breath puffing out in little white clouds, she barely looked cold.

"Okay, here goes," I said. With the ship good and cold, I drove the Krishna at minimum output, taking the long way around to slip into the

blind spot of three medium craft. Neither their small nor medium craft showed any signs of noticing us.

"Master Hiro, why haven't they responded?" Mimi asked.

"Ships in battle usually run at high temperatures, so people mainly rely on heat sensors to search for them," I said. "Ship debris and other stuff tends to drift around big battlefields like this, so it's harder to use the normal radar. By reducing the ship's temperature, we can fool the heat sensors and slip in close with the debris."

In *Stella Online*, this was a technique called running cold. Normally, the emergency cooling system kept ships from overheating from overused lasers and things like that, but it could also be used for this.

"Impressive," Mimi said. "There must be so many clever techniques."

"It's not something that'll always work, but it got us in range this time around. Let's party."

"Yes, sir."

After confirming that I was in the blind spot of all three medium craft, I reactivated the weapons system and set my laser and flak sights on their exposed underbellies. The pirates clamored.

"Gah?! Enemy ship detected below us! How'd they slip into our blind spot?!"

"Whaaat?! Dammit, were you paying attention at all or were you napping in battle again?!"

"I was watching, I swear! It just appeared out of nowhere, like a ghost!"

"Like I'd believe that! Turn! Tuuurn!"

But I shook my head and said, "It's too late, my man." I fired all four lasers in quick succession, instantly dropping the shields of every one of the medium craft.

"Eep?! Where'd our shields go?!"

"The hell?! G-get out! Use the boosters!"

"You're in the way! Move!"

While the medium craft panicked, I gave them a nice, rapid-fire dose of flak. A spray of shrapnel tore through their soft underbellies, destroying their generators, life support systems, power distribution systems, and ammo stores all at once.

“It’s no use! We can’t hold on!”

“Evacuate! Abandon ship!”

Mini-detonations surged through the ships, culminating in massive explosions that blasted them all into dust.

“Mimi, don’t forget to tell them,” I said.

“Y-yes, sir! This is Captain Hiro, call sign Krishna. I am his operator, Mimi. We are intervening in this battle to aid you now!”

“Thank you for the help!” an ally responded. “Honestly, we were struggling.”

“Tch, I don’t wanna lose my cut. Let’s shoot those pirates down!”

“Nngh! He has his own cute operator girl, too?! Some guys have all the luck.”

“How do you know she’s cute? You only heard her voice, dude.”

“Listen. Her voice is cute, so she’s gotta be cute. Never has a girl with a cute voice *not* had a cute face to match.”

Did these guys even need my help? They didn’t sound all that serious or worried right now.

“Let’s kill more,” I told Mimi.

“O-okay!”

I fired my four heavy lasers wildly, occasionally tossing out flak as I passed by pirate ships. Having lost their three medium craft in seconds, the remaining pirates panicked. Their communications broke down. They piloted frantically, totally disjointed now. The chaos made them easy pickings.

“Eaaargh! That four-armed monster!”

“Shit! Stop the guy with the arms! We gotta shut him down!”

“Idiot! If we try to suppress him, he’ll just blow us to bits with flak! Do it yourself!”

“Run, run! We can’t win this!”

“Gah?! Don’t run! The galactic police will snatch you!” One pirate attempted escape, only to meet a thick ray of light that blew his ship to smithereens. Looked like the police had finished making their cage and were flying in for clean up.

“You have nowhere to run,” I said. “Now die.”

“You’re the one who’s gonna die, arm bastard!”

The remaining pirates trained their weapons on the Krishna and fired. *So they’re gonna focus on me first?* I wove through the flashing light of their attacks, spun around, and tried to shake off the pursuing pirates.

The ship’s AI sounded the alert. The ship status hologram reported a successful hit.

“Eeeeek!” Mimi shrieked.

I kept my cool. Yes, we had been hit, but it just dinged one of our three shields. We still had two more, and at this rate I could use shield cells after the second was broken and still have time to recover. Even if we somehow lost all our shields, we still had sturdy armor underneath. It certainly wasn’t time to panic yet.

The pirates went on firing at me, desperate and sloppy. I focused on evasion, counting on the other mercs to seize the opportunity.

“Yeehaw! Let’s eat ’em up, boys!” a merc shouted.

“Wanna ignore us, huh? That’ll be your last mistake!” another cheered.

“Typhoon, Fox 2, Fox 2!”

“Hurricane, Fox 2, Fox 2!”

No longer stuck on the defensive, the mercenaries eagerly smashed ship after ship. It was no fun just dodging, so I waited for my chance and finished off a couple pirates with my heavy lasers. They were way cheaper than the flak, which made them the better choice if I wanted to leave this expedition with a bigger payday.

It barely took fifteen minutes for us to clear out the entire space pirate fleet. Cheering rang out over the mercenary comms.

“Area cleared. We won, boys!”

“Shit started to go south for a sec, but then Four-Arms came in and saved the day!”

“Good going, Four-Arms.”

Welp, looked like I was Four-Arms now. Not the coolest nickname I’d ever heard, but it had a certain kind of charm.

“I’m off to the next area,” I said. “Good luck.”

“You too, bud. And same to your lovely little operator!”

“O-oh!” Mimi exclaimed. “Thank you.”

“Damn, she sounds so cute! She’s gotta be real cute!”

“You’ve got a one-track mind, my man. That’s why you’ll be a virgin forever.”

“V-v-virgin?! Nah, bro!”

Wow. Was that a common insult in this universe, too? Guess some things truly never changed.

I accelerated away from the celebrating mercenaries, searching for my next battle. That’s when I saw *that* ship again.

“There’s that white ship Elma’s piloting,” I said.

“Is Elma fighting?” Mimi said.

“Yeah. Let’s go see her.”

Beams of harsh light slashed through the black of space. That wasn't good. Elma faced a medium craft equipped with a type of laser called a "gerobi," along with its bodyguards. My Krishna's heavy lasers were of the pulse variety, shooting successive bursts of energy. Gerobi lasers, on the other hand, used a continuous high-temperature beam to burn through ships or make them overheat and shut down. The name came from a robot fighting game where the bots pretty much vomited beams at each other.

Up against that, Elma was in real danger. I slammed the accelerator and dashed toward her.

"Wh-why aren't my controls worki—aaaaaaah?!"

Hearing her screams, I pushed Krishna to go even faster. Unfortunately, I was still too late.

"Whoa, what's that white ship?!" another mercenary said. "Huh? It's coming this way. Oh shit, move!"

Elma's white ship dashed and spun and flew wildly, all its insane speed on full display. At this point, there was nothing I could do.

"M-master Hiro, is she okay?" Mimi asked.

"Not at all. When that happens, it doesn't stop until the ship explodes."

Elma continued to scream. "Noooooo! D-does anyone know why—hyaaaaah?!" She clearly hadn't known about the ship's rampage feature. She wasn't a veteran who knew the risks; she was one of the idiots who bought it just because it had high specs.

"U-um, can't we help her?" Mimi said.

"There's no way to help," I said, shaking my head. "Look how fast she's going. If we get too close, she might slam into us and kill us, too."

"N-no! But poor Elma!"

"Don't worry. That ship's cockpit is extremely sturdy in this game—I mean, it's extremely sturdy, so I don't think she'll die. If it explodes, we just need to recover the cockpit."

Elma slammed through the pirates' barricade and rampaged among their ranks. I braced for her to come this way, but it didn't seem she would.

Instead, she was going…directly toward the galactic police's fleet?!

"Eeek! Run, run, ruuun!" she tried to warn them.

"Whoa?! Sh-she's coming this way!"

"Launch a counter—wait, isn't that a mercenary? Ngaaaah?!"

Elma's ship barreled into a police battleship, sustained serious damage, and came to a stop at last. The cockpit itself looked safe; if she was lucky, she might not even be hurt. Unfortunately, the police ship wasn't looking too hot after that impact. Were they gonna demand repair costs?

"Umm… What should we do?" Mimi asked.

"Unfortunately, there's really nothing we can do. Let's focus on the job at hand."

"Y-yes, sir."

Elma's rampage did have one distinct upside. The pirates broke their formation and fell into total disarray, presenting a juicy opportunity for me. It wasn't that I didn't care about Elma, but I really couldn't do much for her. Might as well keep working.

***

"How is the battle progressing?" I asked my signalman.

"Lieutenant Serena! Apart from a minor mishap, things seem to be going well."

"Ah, yes, that," I said. "We don't need to try her in court, but make sure to get those repair costs out of her."

"Aye-aye, Captain."

I switched display tabs to watch the mercenaries in action. My eyes got wide. One pilot alone had crushed four medium craft and the most small craft by far. And his earnings were still ticking up, meaning he was still going strong.

"I don't recall us having a mercenary this skilled," I said.

“Hm? Oh, goodness, you’re right. Those are results worthy of gold or even platinum rank, though I’ve never seen this particular name before.” The signalman might not recognize him, but I sure did.

“Retrieve his data for me, please.”

“Right away.”

The data confirmed it. It really was him: the self-styled mercenary who piloted that strange ship. Looked like he’d formally joined the ranks of the mercenaries since his little interrogation.

“Bronze rank…?” I said, bewildered.

“His exploits are clearly beyond bronze, aren’t they? He registered… only about a week ago. A bronze-ranker making this many kills after only a week? He must be a former military pilot or something, perhaps even an ace.”

“Perhaps…”

I remembered him clearly. He was barely older than me, so he couldn’t be a retired military pilot. Besides, he didn’t have the air of a military man at all. Nor a mercenary, quite honestly. He struck me as a normal civilian, though that clearly couldn’t be true.

None of it added up. He piloted a top-class warship, and he piloted it well. Controlling a warship like that demanded phenomenal concentration, which was difficult in a life-or-death situation. Some pilots took medicine or used hypnosis to get through it. Yet somehow this utterly ordinary civilian had the skill and courage to pilot that monster of a warship—and do it with a cool head even in the midst of battle. What could that be called if not *strange*? Who was this man?

“The score gap keeps growing,” the signalman cheered. “He might triple the second place pilot’s score!”

Triple? At this pace, it seemed rather unlikely that he would stop there.

“Keep an eye on him,” I said. “Get as much data as you possibly can.”

The signalman responded with the usual “aye-aye” and I turned my attention to the strategic battlefield map. Victory lay within reach.

***

We obliterated the space pirates. Little was left of them by the time it was over. In the aftermath, the galactic police prowled the battlefield searching for survivors. Lacking the right equipment to help, I set my sights on collecting my bounties instead.

"Master Hiro, aren't you worried that people will steal your rewards before you can collect them?" Mimi asked.

"The stuff that flies out of their cargo and is floating loose in space is first-come, first-served, it looks like. But any ships we destroyed got tagged with my name automatically, so we don't have to worry about those," I said.

My treasures were scattered across the battlefield thanks to the way I'd zipped from one fight to the next. It made the work of collecting my bounties pretty tedious. Still, it was well worth my time to salvage whatever I could. Pirates carried valuable cargo, including Rare Metal.

"Heigh-ho, heigh-ho…" I sang to myself as I worked.

"Master Hiro, are you enjoying yourself?"

"Of course. This is way better than killing people. You never know what kind of treasure you might find among the junk. Why, are you not enjoying this?"

"Well, I'm rather worried about Elma…" Mimi said.

"You're too sweet, Mimi. Her ship did sustain a lot of damage, but she rammed into a police battleship. That definitely stopped her crazy rampage. She's fine."

"Are you positive?" Mimi asked.

"Yep. Police ships have medical facilities and doctors on board, too. Nothing to worry about."

"I see. Well, that's good to know." Elma's life may not be in danger, but her wallet sure was. She would have to pay off repairs for not only her own expensive ship but also the damaged battleship. *Ouch, scary.*

Not to be heartless, but I couldn't just take care of that for her. I didn't have any real reason to. She helped me out with registering and with Mimi, but I already gave her a ton of booze as a reward for that. My debt was paid. Of course, I was grateful for all her help, but shouldering a debt that massive wasn't my job. Elma was an independent mercenary. She might even take offense at me sticking my nose in to help. If she asked… well, I'd see what I could do. But she hadn't, so it wasn't my problem for now.

I changed the subject. "C'mon, let's go get some treasure. Try to memorize the process while you watch me. It's pretty easy."

"Y-yes, sir."

Send a recovery drone to drifting ship carcasses, scan the inside, and take their cargo. *Mmm, nice, they've got food, alcohol, and ammunition.* Easy staples to cash in on, right there. *Ooh and refined industrial metals? Those will fetch a good price.* Apart from that, it looked like air cleaners, spare parts, a water purifier and filters, and some other maintenance items. Not too exciting, but profitable nonetheless. Quick, clean cash, since the colony needed this kind of stuff for its own maintenance. Still, it would have been nice to score some actual treasure from this little hunt. *Oh! Nice, Rare Metal.* There wasn't much, but I was thrilled to see it. Good, easy money.

"There's quite a lot of loot here, Master Hiro," Mimi said.

"Yep, there is. But the best part is the Rare Metal."

"Hm? Oh, what's this?"

"Hmm." Something strange sat among the recovered items. I had to run a scan to try to figure out what it was. A crystal? It was sealed inside a weirdly secure container. Could it be? No way. "Oooh. I know what this is."

"What is it?" Mimi asked.

"This is a Singing Crystal. It's kinda dangerous."

"It is? Should we take it home?"

"Good question," I wondered.

Singing Crystals were unique items. Certain collectors would offer a handsome reward for a thing like this. That didn't make it any less

dangerous. This little crystal could summon crystal life-forms from the far reaches of space.

That wasn't the only danger, though. The Singing Crystal got its name from the sound it made, a sound like someone was singing inside it. Anyone who heard that song would be consumed with longing, their mind contaminated. And you couldn't just smash it, either. Destroying it would put you in grave danger as hundreds or even thousands of the crystal life-forms swarmed. In *Stella Online*, it took a good ten squadrons just to stand a fighting chance against the beasts. In the game, we'd used it to kick off raids.

"Let's take it with us, sneaky-sneaky." I winked at Mimi. Given the current situation, the Singing Crystal provided a nice bit of insurance. I still didn't know quite what was going on with relations between the different factions and governments, for example.

"Sneaky-sneaky?"

"Yep. Keep quiet about it."

It wasn't illegal or anything, but it always brought trouble. Fortunately, the Krishna had a few special cargo spaces installed that could elude scans, so I could store it there. A mercenary needed a few hidey-holes like that. Certain illegal items still had their uses, after all.

We returned to Tarmein Prime with the police and the other mercs after collecting all the loot the ship could hold. Elma had to get towed back. Her ship looked like it was beyond repair. With the frame crushed and mangled, she'd probably be better off just buying a new one. Jeez, how fast was she going when she hit that police battleship? I started to worry, just a little.

The comms crackled as we headed home and Lieutenant Serena addressed the mercenaries en masse.

"This marks the end of this operation," she said. "Well done, everyone. We've destroyed the pirate base and the vast majority of their ships. This star system should be safer for some time to come."

For some time, huh? This system was full of resources and close to the border; pirates wouldn't stay away long, even after a massacre like that. They were as persistent as cockroaches.

“As for your rewards, they will be transferred to your guild accounts as soon as we’ve finished calculating everything. It should be two days at the most.”

Was that fast or slow? In-game, we’d get our rewards instantly upon returning to a base, but in real life, two days seemed pretty speedy considering all the bureaucracy involved.

No one complained, so I figured two days was pretty standard. Fine by me. Mimi and I would be fine financially in the meantime. I felt secure that the government wouldn’t try to skim anything off the top either. That was a great way to lose trust among us.

“All right,” I said, “Mimi, send a docking request.”

“Understood, sir.” Mimi used the operator’s console to send a docking request to Tarmein Prime. Before long, the Port Authority designated a hangar bay for us. This was her first docking request, but she handled the job smoothly. We obeyed the instructions and guide markers, and docked carefully. A minor bump in a space like this could mean a major headache later.

The moment the ship was fastened down and transported to the air lock, we both sighed with relief. Much like in-game, docking after a mission brought with it an overwhelming sense of safety.

“Master Hiro, what will we do now?” Mimi asked.

“Now? Hmm, I wonder. Maybe we take some time off until we get paid? You must be mentally and physically exhausted. I sure am.”

I took off my seatbelt, stood up, and stretched. My body ached and creaked as I did. Just sitting in the pilot’s seat felt like strenuous exercise with all those g-forces throwing me around during the battle. I got the ship’s self-check program running. Krishna would need a rest too after a rigorous battle like that. We were likely in for some maintenance and restocking in the aftermath.

“That’s not what I mean, sir,” Mimi said, shaking her head. “Where will we go and what will we do?”

“Where and what, huh?” Kind of a big philosophical question there. From whence did humanity spring and where will our species venture to

next? What will we leave behind?

Okay, maybe I was getting a little too deep there.

“Are you asking what my overall objective is?” I said.

“Yes,” Mimi said.

“Well, I’d like to build a detached house with a yard on some residential planet.”

“That’s quite the grand objective.”

“Isn’t it, though?”

I didn’t mention all this, but my dream wasn’t just the house. The house was just step one. After that, I planned to live off savings interest, eat whatever I wanted, sleep as much as I liked, and just generally have fun. That was the life, at least in my mind. Mimi might find it lame or boring, though, so I left all that out.

“What about you?” I said. “What kind of goals do you have? You can’t just live for the sake of living.”

“I’ve never really thought much about it,” Mimi said.

“You gotta start somewhere. Maybe you wanna try all the food in the universe or see all the interesting sights or whatever.” Gourmet travel, sightseeing. Those sounded like worthwhile goals to me. Heck, maybe I’d add them to my own personal list.

“Trying all the food in the universe sounds nice,” Mimi said. “Maybe I’ll do that.”

“I think I’ll join you, then.”

“All right! Then my goal is to eat everything in the universe at your side!”

“Woo!” I applauded Mimi as she wrung her hands with enthusiasm. On that day, I created a universe-devouring monster in a cute little package.

“But I mustn’t get out of shape, so I’ll keep up with my exercise!” Mimi said.

“True. Though I think you’ll be fine with a little more meat on your bones,” I said.

“Do you think so?” Mimi patted her stomach. Then, she shuddered. Whoa, that was abrupt. “U-um, it seems I’m a little sweaty. I’m gonna hop in the shower.”

“Sure. Enjoy.”

Mimi shuffled out of the cockpit while trying to tug her jacket down to cover her lower half. Something wasn’t right here. Wait… “Did she wet herself?” We’d come out of that battle pretty clean, but we had been shot at a lot. Small wonder if it terrified someone navigating their first fight.

I sniffed the cockpit, but it didn’t smell like anything was amiss. What in the world?

“Jeez, I look like a perv. No more of this.”

This was one mystery that wasn’t worth pursuing right now. I gave up, heading for the kitchen. I needed food and water and a shower myself. Then, finally, I could rest.

Chapter 8:
The Return of the Wad of Bills

WE SPENT THE REST of that day and the next just relaxing and getting the ship back in order. We would need to replace some furniture, which meant a trip to the colony after we got paid today. It would be nice to stretch our legs. Mimi bounced in place as we planned out our shopping trip.

"You seem excited," I teased.

"That's because I am!" Mimi had declared it her mission to savor all the tastes of the galaxy, and she was getting started right away. Already she'd researched a high-performance cooker for gourmet ingredients, one available in a shop right on Tarmein Prime. We would integrate the new cooker into an overhaul of the Krishna's furnishings and appliances.

Of course, that overhaul meant more than just a fancy cooker. We would also get a toilet with a warm-water bidet, a water purifier, an air-filtering device, a fancy air conditioner, and more. It wouldn't be cheap, but it would make our bathroom comfier and the whole ship more livable. Besides, it was cheaper than generators and shield erectors by far.

Our shopping trip today meant Mimi could slip into some casual clothes, though I still wore my usual mercenary stuff. Her choice made her look more mature, I thought.

"That's cute," I complimented her. "Or maybe pretty is the word."

"D-do you think so?"

"Absolutely! It's great. You're looking like a fine lady."

"Hee hee." Mimi put her hands on her cheeks and fidgeted. That cuteness of hers was a deadly weapon. It might undo me before we managed to leave the ship. I had to shake myself, lest I give in and we just spend the whole day playing around in bed. No! We had to get to that shop. The fun could come later.

“Looks like we’re pretty close to the merc guild,” I said when we disembarked.

“We are!” Mimi said. “Along with government offices and mercenary guilds, this area has some of the bigger ship makers and furniture dealers. It should be quite safe!”

“Interesting. You’ve definitely got talent as an operator, Mimi.”

“R-really?”

“Heck yeah. You dug up all the most important info *and* gave me directions. Fantastic job.”

“Aww. I’m glad to hear that.” Mimi cradled her tablet and beamed with joy.

Her smile infected me, too. I was thrilled to see her succeeding at her new job and happy to share in her excitement about it. Putting someone through mental anguish over any little mistake didn’t help anyone, I believed. The way to actually build trust while picking up a new skill was through positive reinforcement.

Of course, not everyone was on board with the “nice and supportive” approach. Back in my old life, I’d had a boss who believed nagging, teasing, and general cruelty was the way to train me. He’d scold me right in front of my coworkers, bring up any little mistake endlessly, and even resort to personal insults. Boy did his tune change when I distinguished myself as a network admin and moved up the ladder. Ugh, just remembering that jerk makes me angry.

Well, whatever. That dumb jerk didn’t matter anymore, Mimi did. Mimi and I were partners now, dependent on each other for our survival in this universe. We were more than just a captain and crew, who might operate like a boss with employees. In battle, we were partners. At least, that’s the kind of relationship I was hoping to build, one based on faith, sincerity, and love, one where we could rely on each other completely.

Frankly, I didn’t think I could have been a cruel boss-type with her even if I wanted to. Not with how much I already cared about her. Maybe I was just a sucker for a cute face, but I didn’t care. Mimi was special to me.

We got on the elevator that would take us from the port district to the colony proper, savoring the glimpses of space as we went. The stars spread out before us, only interrupted by the metal frame of the elevator shaft.

"I never get tired of seeing this," I said.

"Are you not used to the sight by now, Master Hiro?"

"Not really. I didn't get to see it with my own eyes until recently."

"Really…? Where did you live before you came to this colony?"

"Before the colony…" Shoot, I was supposed to be sticking to my cover story about memory loss. *Oops! I almost told the truth there.* "Thing is, my memories aren't super clear. Thanks to some hyperdrive accident or something, I ended up in this Tarmein System. But everything before that is fuzzy."

"Huh? I-Is that true?! That sounds awful!"

"Maybe. But it doesn't really affect me now, so I'm not too worried about it. Though I was thinking of going to a medical station and doing a detailed medical check just to make sure."

"That's a good idea. After we go back to the ship, I'll look for the best station nearby."

"Thank you."

It was sweet of Mimi to worry about my health like this. Though I guess if I just up and died one day, she'd be in a pretty tight spot. *I'd better take good care of my health.*

I had to promise to do a daily vitals check to allay Mimi's concerns. It was a small price to pay to make her feel better. A quick vitals check didn't take all that long. Even relieved, she clung to my arm, worried and nervous. *Ooh, she's wonderfully soft. It almost makes me* want *to make her worry!*

We headed for the furniture dealer Mimi had found online. They were expecting us thanks to Mimi making an appointment in advance.

An employee guided us through their products. "This is Musashino Tech's pride and joy, our newest high-performance cooker, the Steel Chef 5. Our tried-and-true Steel Chef series boasts the highest market share in the

industry, and this model is at the very cutting edge. Why, we only released it two months ago."

"Two months ago, wow," I said. "When did the one before that come out?"

"About eight years ago. The Steel Chef series' biggest selling points are not just the exquisite food that comes from their high-performance cooking but also the reliability that we've built in by utilizing feedback from accidents and failures. The Steel Chef 4 boasted an incredibly low failure rate of only 0.004 percent within three years of purchase. You can expect fantastic food no matter what conditions you're in. And of course, the Steel Chef 5 has inherited all the best features of the Steel Chef 4."

I probed for more info. "What are the running costs and maintenance needs like?"

"Power consumption is on the higher end, but it does have a self-maintenance function that uses nanomachine technology. It is effectively maintenance-free. Interior and filter cleaning is all done while it's on standby."

"I see. I do like easy maintenance."

"Agreed," Mimi chimed in. "A high-performance machine is worthless if it takes all day to fix. But Master Hiro, do you mind the power consumption?"

"That's not a problem. We've got more than enough generator output." The generator on the Krishna was top-tier, military-grade stuff. We had generator output for *days*.

"How would you like to enjoy a personal demonstration?" the employee suggested. "Let's start with a regular food cartridge from the grocery store to make the simplest template: a hamburger."

The employee got the Steel Chef 5 churning on that hamburger. No matter how fancy, all these cookers used the same base elements more or less: food cartridges that were basically cultured algae and 3D food printing. Which begged the question: could they really be *that* different?

"Holy crap," I exclaimed after my first bite of the burger the employee produced. "Why is this so delicious?"

“It’s wonderful,” Mimi said. How was this thing using the same cartridges as our current cooker but making something so much better? This hamburger made all other hamburgers I had ever eaten taste like crappy fast food. No competition whatsoever.

“Ingredient ratios, heating, and seasoning all have the power to change a meal’s texture and taste on their own,” the employee said. “The artificial intelligence installed in the Steel Chef 5 uses template data while adding in the most minor of twists in these facets of cooking.”

“Incredible. Mimi, we’re buying this,” I decided.

“But isn’t it expensive?”

“Retail price is 48,000 Ener,” the employee said, “but since you’ll be buying other furnishings as well, we would be glad to offer a 3,000 Ener discount, making it 45,000. That price also includes a three-year warranty.”

“Wow! Okay, let’s put this on the list and check out our next item,” I said.

“Thank you very much, sir!”

By the time we were through, we had the whole ship refitted—from the cooker to the air conditioning—with Musashino Tech’s high-quality furnishings. The total came out to around 300,000 Ener, but a comfortable living environment would directly impact our mental health while we lived on the ship. Being stingy here would hurt a lot later.

Besides, 300,000 Ener was way less than I’d paid for Mimi’s debts and freedom. This alone wouldn’t make much of a dent in our finances. Even with Mimi’s debts, I still had around 2,000,000 Ener on hand. That didn’t even include the rewards we would get from taking down those pirates. Altogether, I took down forty-two small craft and five medium craft, so I could expect about 360,000 Ener from the military. That alone paid off today’s shopping trip and more.

That wasn’t even all I could expect from the mission. On top of all that, the pirate bounties would net 480,000 Ener or so. Plus all the loot from the ships! I’d scooped up a good amount of Rare Metal. I estimated I could make about 800,000 Ener from that alone.

Altogether, this pirate-killing spree earned me about 1,600,000 Ener. Frankly, my profits were almost hilarious. Spending 300,000 of that to drastically improve our living situation was an easy decision.

One, ahem, particularly special upgrade we purchased was for the bed in my room. The new one would fit two people instead of one so we could, well, you know. If I was embarrassed about this, though, Mimi was practically blowing steam out of her ears. Her adorable reaction almost made my own discomfort worth it.

After we finished ordering, we headed to the mercenary guild, as we still needed to confirm and receive our rewards. The moment we stepped into the guild, our friend the scary receptionist was already furious.

"What the hell, man?" he said. "Did you bring her with you just to show off? Huh?!"

"Replacement, please," I said flatly.

"The hell do you mean, repla—bwargh!"

The other receptionist must have heard the commotion because she stepped in and slapped the scary guy on the head with a thick folder. *Ouch, that had to hurt.* Dazed from the pain, he was easy to move as the other receptionist threw him out of his chair and took his place.

"Your replacement has arrived," she said, smiling politely. "I presume you're here for your rewards and bounties?"

"Yup." I swore to never defy this woman. How could she toss aside a giant like him with one hand? Did they replace her body with cyborg parts or something? Maybe modern technology made her freakishly strong? Either way, I made a mental note to stay on her good side.

She looked up our rewards and bounties from the mission. Just as I expected, we'd leave this office about 840,000 Ener richer. I say "about" because there were some decimals involved in the bounties. The difference was around 8,123 Ener.

"I was also hoping to have some maintenance and ammo-refilling done on my ship," I said.

"Of course. Do you need refills on flak ammunition, chaffs, flares, or shield cells?"

“Yes, ma’am. All of the above. If you please.”

“Sure, we can take care of that.” The receptionist smiled sweetly. Doing ship maintenance and replenishing ammunition was probably a major part of the mercenary guild’s revenue. “Goodness, though. You did quite the job out there.”

“Yeah, we did. I just wish there were some tougher pirates so we could’ve made more money.” I was actually serious about that. It was nice that there were so many small craft, but they came with small bounties, as well. If they were stronger and more skilled, maybe I could’ve squeezed some more money out of them, but these pirates were just a mob of idiots. I could have waltzed out of here with some *serious* cash if they were all medium craft instead.

“Well, public safety in this star system is better than in many places,” she explained. “You’ll have plenty of opportunities to join police-sponsored pirate hunts.”

“Sounds great. Maybe I ought to check out a different system for higher bounties, though.”

“Wouldn’t that be dangerous?” Mimi asked.

“Oh yes, absolutely,” the receptionist said. “The pirates in such star systems are both stronger and more plentiful. But if you have the skill to hunt them, I imagine you can make quite the small fortune that way.”

Yes, it was dangerous to search farther afield, but the pirates in this star system were like flies before my strength. I wasn’t some fighting fetishist, so I wasn’t looking for a fight just for the sake of fighting, but it would be nice to make money faster.

“With your skill, Hiro, perhaps you would flourish in a more dangerous system.”

“Yeah? I guess this system will be peaceful for a while after that hunt we just did.”

“You know, the guild doesn’t only handle pirate-extermination jobs,” the receptionist said. “We can also have you do bodyguard or transport duty.”

“My ship isn’t really made for transport, and guarding someone just sounds annoying.”

“The guild would certainly appreciate it if you were willing.”

“I’d suggest you give those jobs to a squadron or something.”

A squadron made up of a group of mercenary ships all working together would be much better suited to escort work. If I was alone and peeled off to fight an enemy, it would leave the person I should be protecting wide open. But staying close would just make me vulnerable to long-range fire myself. A group of bodyguards could divvy up the duties of protecting the ship and pursuing the attackers. In a situation like that I was likely to run into some sort of trouble for fighting solo. It just wasn’t for me.

“Do you not want to form a squadron? I expect you’d be very popular,” the receptionist said.

“Meh, not right now,” I said. “We’ve got stuff we want to do.”

I turned my attention to Mimi. We still had to find a medical station and figure out how we’d earn more money for that house with a yard I dreamed of. We had plenty to keep ourselves occupied.

“I see.” The receptionist woman smirked at us. Why did it feel like she seriously misunderstood? “I expect you’ll make plenty of money, and you aren’t hard on the eyes, either. You do seem a little…dangerous, but I imagine plenty of folks find that charming. Are you two going on your honeymoon? I wish you luck.”

“Thank you!” Mimi smiled dreamily. Wait, shouldn’t she have denied it? Were we calling this a honeymoon?

“It’s not exactly a…” I began.

“Am I wrong?” The receptionist’s eyebrows raised.

“Is she?” Meanwhile, Mimi watched me with anticipation, tears shimmering in her eyes. Yikes, was this that important to her?

“Uhh, I dunno? I guess it’s kinda, maybe like that?”

Mimi smiled. Phew. Disaster averted.

The receptionist appraised us both. “I apologize if this is rude, but what exactly is the nature of your relationship?”

“That’s a tough question,” I replied. “Kinda like captain-to-crew and guardian-to-ward combined, maybe?”

“Yes. Um, I owe Master Hiro my life, so that’s why I call him… Master,” Mimi said.

“Hiro?” The lady narrowed her eyes. Oops! If I didn’t pick my words carefully, she might throw me with that strong arm of hers.

I rushed to explain: “A group of thugs in the Third Division tried to assault her and I stepped in to help. Since she didn’t have anywhere to go, I…um, I pretty much made her a member of the crew.” I stood stiff and tense, awaiting the judgment of the terrifying receptionist.

“I ended up in the Third Division because of the debt I inherited from my late parents,” Mimi said. “Master Hiro didn’t just pay off my debts, though; he even paid for my taxes and freedom of movement, 500,000 Ener altogether. As such, I decided to dedicate my life to him.”

The woman closed her eyes for a moment before nodding. “I’ll allow it.”

“Woo-hoo!” I couldn’t help but do a little fist pump. I’d survived the impromptu inquisition.

“Your love story begins with a girl being saved from her predicament by a wandering mercenary. It almost sounds like a sappy romance novel.”

“It’s not all flowers and rainbows,” I said. I mean, Mimi had ended up sharing her first time with me. You could definitely get the impression I was some piece of shit who used money to get what he wanted from girls, but that wasn’t the case here. I cared about Mimi, and she cared about me, too.

“I disagree,” Mimi protested. “I’ve been so blessed since the day I met you. You’re kind, and you indulge me in everything I could ever want.”

“I do?” I scratched my head.

“Don’t you remember spending 300,000 Ener to update our ship’s facilities earlier?”

“That benefits me, too,” I said. “I don’t think you could call that indulging you.”

The receptionist tilted her head and rested it against her hand, watching our little lover’s spat. “I love how you two get along. Maybe I should quit my job and be a member of your crew, too?”

“Y-you can’t.” Mimi clung tightly to my arm, her chest pushing soft against me. *Aah, this is bliss.*

The tough male receptionist, recovered from his ordeal, watched us from afar, biting back bitter tears. He wasn’t the only one. Other men hanging around the guild clicked their tongues and snuck envious looks my direction. *Heh, jealous? Too bad. Mimi is all mine!*

“That is a shame,” the receptionist said, shaking her head.

“Ha ha ha. Well, we’d better get going… Oh, actually.” Just as I stood up to leave, I remembered that I had one last question. “Do you know anything about how Elma is doing? She helped us out when I brought Mimi on board and her ship took heavy damage during the mission. We’ve been worried about her.”

“Oh, hmm. Elma?” The woman grinned awkwardly.

“She’s not badly hurt, is she?”

“No, she’s not hurt. Er, but she is dealing with some rather hefty fines from the military.”

Well, that made sense. She probably had some *insane* debts to deal with now.

“Do you think she’ll get back on her feet?” I asked.

“I’m afraid it doesn’t seem likely,” the receptionist replied.

“Oh.” I winced.

Watching our conversation, Mimi cocked her head in confusion. I didn’t think it was worth explaining…but eh, whatever.

“I sort of expected this,” I told Mimi. “Between her own ship’s damages and the repairs for the police ship, she’s in trouble.”

“That’s awful! But…”

“Yeah. It’s rough.”

Sure, I wanted to help Elma out, but I also didn’t want to stick my nose in where it didn’t belong. We’d only just met a few days ago. She might not want my help. Though, if she was really in it that deep, maybe she wouldn’t mind a little hand up.

“Where is Elma?” I asked.

“She’s running around looking for a way to pay off the police.”

“If she can’t pay it back, is she getting the ol’…?” I stuck my hands out like I was about to be arrested.

“Yes,” the receptionist said. Of course. Oh, Elma. I wasn’t sure where she’d end up next, but it wouldn’t be good. This system chucked criminals onto asteroids to do hard labor, after all.

“Will she be sent to a prison station?” Mimi asked.

“Yes, dear. But…well, the criminal population there is overwhelmingly male. There is a tendency for them to commit…er, certain crimes.”

“Aw, dammit,” I cursed. I hated the thought of Elma going through that, but…hmm. “Could you tell her to call me if she needs anything?”

“Are you sure?”

“This has gotta be fate or something. Not that I know what I can do.” All I had to offer was cash, but if that’s how this got resolved, I’d basically be buying her—not in a sexual way, of course. She’d become a member of my crew.

Hm, that might not be so bad, actually. Elma could help teach Mimi. She could earn a cut of our profits based on performance and pay off her debt to me over time. No hard labor…or worse.

“By the way, how is crew payment typically determined?” I asked, following my running train of thought.

“Based on how much they’ve invested into the ship or what role they play.”

“For reference, what about Mimi?”

“Mimi? Hmm. The ship is entirely under your ownership, yes?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“In that case, we’ll base it off of your personnel’s skills. Mimi, can you confirm that you are in a romantic relationship with Hiro?”

“Huh?” Mimi gasped. “Um, well, yes.”

“We’ll take that into consideration. Zero investment, essentially amateur, crew member in training, and romantically involved with the captain. Market rate would be between 0.1 percent and 0.5 percent.”

“Half a percent? That’s, uh…kinda low.” I raised an eyebrow. Our total rewards and bounties earned us 840,000 Ener. If Mimi’s share was 0.5 percent, that meant 4,200 Ener. With a conversion rate of 1 Ener to 100 yen, her reward was about 420,000 yen. Was that really enough for tying herself to me and my ability to keep us alive out there? I did pay living expenses, but I still had to wonder.

“It is very low,” the receptionist said. “It will improve as she improves her skills as an operator, but right now she’s simply your girlfriend. That said, considering how much work you put in…4,200 Ener, was it? That’s more than my monthly salary, you know.” The receptionist put a weight behind those words. Was she actually considering joining my crew? *Please, no. I’m deathly afraid of women who can throw me with one hand.*

“F-four thousand?! I can’t take that much!” Mimi protested.

“Why not? You earned it. Go on and take it.”

She trembled at the sudden windfall, but it was pocket change to me. Compared to the costs of repairing the ship, replenishing supplies, paying the docking fees, and restocking the groceries, 4,000 was nothing.

“Mimi,” I said, “this money belongs to you. You earned it. If you think you’re getting too much, put it in savings.”

“Maybe you’re right.” Mimi didn’t seem entirely convinced, but she took her pay.

I was relieved. Paying her expenses without giving her a salary of some sort felt awful to me, with how much she was helping me with daily life. Plus, she risked her life right beside mine. If it were up to me, I would have given her 5 or 10 percent, but clearly Mimi had some reluctance about

being overpaid. I'd be better off sticking with the market price. I could probably set up a separate savings account for Mimi on my own as well to make sure she was well taken care of.

The receptionist had one last thing for us: a guide for calculating crew rewards. With that in hand, we headed back out into the Third Division to finish up our shopping. Starting tomorrow, we'd be souping up the ship, installing the new furnishings, and replenishing our supplies. Then, it was off to our next adventure.

***

"Mmn…" I murmured with contentment as I awoke on our new, springy bed. It would be tough to get a better, deeper sleep than on a new bed with a beautiful girl beside me.

Mimi snored contentedly. We'd definitely broken the bed in last night, if you catch my drift. God, was I ever hooked. How could I not be? Mimi was cute, brave, honest, affectionate. *Not* falling for her would have been far more difficult.

I slipped out of bed silently, trying not to wake Mimi, and scooped up the clothing scattered across the floor. Our new cutting-edge washing machine could clean and dry them with no detergent—and in just five minutes.

I didn't bother getting dressed as I headed for the bathroom. Warm water gushed into the tub. I eased down into it, reclining while the tub took care of the cleaning. It even drained the water at the end and switched to a mode that would give me a full body massage.

Aah, this is heaven. A bath like this could turn me into a couch potato fast. A bath potato? Whatever.

When I stepped out of the tub, the bathroom filled with tiny particles that not only dried me but also wrapped around me like a warm, fuzzy towel. I had no clue how it worked, but dang, it was nice.

My clothes were dry by the time I returned to the laundry room so I threw them on and returned to the bedroom, stroking Mimi's cheek to wake

her gently.

"Nnm…Master Hiro?"

"Good morning, Mimi."

"Mm…" Mimi held out her hands sleepily, so I pulled her into a hug and laid my head against her chest. Mimi returned my embrace and stroked my hair, giggling to herself. I pulled back to kiss my blushing girlfriend on the cheek. "You can go take a bath, and I'll make the bed," I said. "I've already washed your clothes."

"O-okay." Mimi's face burned as she wrapped her naked body in bedsheets and shuffled toward the bathroom. As soon as she was gone, I pressed a button on the bed. *Boop!* Like magic, the bed started to undo all the, ehem, *activity* from the previous night. It could even handle…the associated messes. All automatically and with the press of a single button.

"Dang, that's cool."

The bed wasn't the only thing that had been upgraded to a luxurious version after that trip to the furniture store yesterday. The air conditioning not only kept the ship at the perfect temperature, but it also nullified bad smells and poisonous gasses. The walls could soundproof themselves with the press of a button. The warm water bidet reminded me of home. The Steel Chef 5 provided spectacular meals any time Mimi and I sat down to eat. Top to bottom, my humble Krishna was now a luxurious cruise ship. I could spend my whole life here.

No! I couldn't give up on my detached house with a yard yet. I still needed to savor a true carbonated soda some day.

Renewing my resolve, I set about my day. First up, breakfast. I let the Steel Chef 5 decide. It could read the minute differences in a user's mental and physical condition to craft the optimal meal. I had no idea how it accomplished that, but it was always right.

While I wiped down the dining table and got us drinks, Mimi joined me. She looked comfortable and relaxed in black shorts and a just-too-large T-shirt.

"Are you off to the training room?" I asked.

"Yes. I need to exercise and improve my stamina."

“Hey, good on you. After I eat, I’ll be right there.”

“Then let’s do our best together!”

Today’s breakfast was something like eels over rice with…yams, I think? I wondered why the Steel Chef was trying so hard to give us a morning energy boost. Maybe it suggested this because we’d worked so hard lately? My curiosity about how it monitored us only deepened.

“You’re not feeling under the weather, are you?” I said.

“No, I’m quite fine. I’ve been doing daily vitals checks like you, Master Hiro. In fact, I’d say I’m doing better than ever now that I live on this ship. The food is wonderful, and I’m getting plenty of exercise. And it seems the medicine is getting along well with my body. I feel better than ever.” Mimi started off with a smile, but she was blushing by the end.

“Then that’s great. Make sure you don’t push yourself *too* hard or you might hurt yourself in the long run.”

“Of course. Incidentally, what are our plans today?”

“Let’s see. Once we finish training and getting our vital checks, how about some grocery shopping? We’re gonna run out of food cartridges soon. Maybe we could get something a little fancy to celebrate all our upgrades around here.”

“That sounds lovely. Afternoon shopping, then?”

Mimi smiled, looking genuinely excited for the trip. It was so nice to see her more relaxed and less awkward. Two weeks of living together had helped a lot with that and now I got to see her natural self. All her initial desperation to not be abandoned had shifted to ease and familiarity. It didn’t hurt that we got along especially well every night.

Breakfast complete, we headed to the training room. Our AI coaches had different scripts for each of us, but the goal was the same: physical fitness and the ability to withstand stronger g-forces. We also trained our endurance by running on treadmills. Honestly, thanks to the nanomachine-infused pills we took each day, I didn’t really feel all that winded by the run, but I supposed it helped.

We cleaned up together after getting sweaty, washing each other in the bath. Having this fun little reward waiting for me after working out

made training painless—exciting, even.

"Okay, let's get going," I said.

"Yes, sir!" As usual, Mimi clenched her fists in determination. Today, she wore full mercenary gear, complete with a small laser hanging from her hip, and so did I. The clothing and gear weren't merely for show. We planned to head back to the location where Mimi had been attacked. We'd probably be fine together, but it was better to be prepared.

Another bit of preparation: teaching Mimi to use the laser gun. Probably, hopefully, she wouldn't need to use it, but it didn't hurt to know how to if things got dicey. I felt satisfied that in the unlikely event of some sort of scuffle, Mimi would know not to hesitate with that laser. For now, however, we set the safeties and left the guns in their holsters. Armed and ready, we took the elevator down to the Third Division.

"Don't be so worried, babe," I said. "Those wusses only attack people who look weak, and we definitely don't look weak."

"O-okay."

"I know it's harder because of what you went through, but remember: I'm right here with you."

"That makes me feel better." Some of the tension melted away as Mimi smiled. I rubbed her back to reassure her, and she hugged me in response. The Public Security Administration cameras on the elevator preventing that hug from turning into anything more, but just holding her left us both feeling safer.

***

"Oh." I froze.

"Um… Is that Elma over there?" Mimi said.

Mimi and I were picking through the squalor of the Third Division when we reached the grocery store and stopped dead in our tracks. Elma sat against the front of the store, the hood of her white cloak casting her face in shadow. Only her elf ears gave her away, two little peaks pointing up under

the hood. Beer bottles littered the ground around her. Oh no. Was she trying to drown her sorrows?

“Master Hiro…” Mimi said.

“Hmm. Yeah, we could at least ask how she’s doing.” As we approached, the hairs on the back of my neck stood on end. In a blink, she drew her laser gun and leveled the barrel at me. I was just as quick, and we stood there threatening each other, weapons ready. Elma’s eyes were flat, like a dead fish watching me bleakly. She held my gaze for a long, long moment before finally lowering her gun and smirking.

“Heh, so what? Did you come here to laugh at me?” Elma said.

“Not at all!” I said. “You helped us, so we’re here to help you. Plus, Mimi’s worried about you.”

“Elma…” Mimi kneeled next to the sitting Elma and extended a hand.

Watching her, Elma snorted derisively. “Only two weeks, and you and I have traded places.”

Mimi said nothing, merely hugging the downtrodden elf. Powerless to resist, Elma surrendered herself to the embrace.

“How bad is it?” I asked.

“The damages to the police are too much,” Elma said. “They could take all my money and everything from my ship and it still wouldn’t be close to enough.”

“How much?”

“I’m 3,000,000 short.”

“Three million…” I snuck a glance at my current funds: 3,300,000 Ener. Technically, I could help her.

“I can’t even work for at least two weeks, since my ship’s out of commission,” she said. “They wouldn’t trust me if I said I could pay them back anyway, not after that huge accident. I tried going to the merc guild for help too, but…” Elma shook her head.

Yeah, figures. It would take time to fix a ship that badly beaten up, leaving Elma out of work while she waited. And the sum was *huge*. Nobody would loan 3,000,000 Ener to a vagrant mercenary. Did this universe even have banks?

Her debt must have been truly massive. A veteran of five years, forced to hand over all her savings *and* sell everything she had, and she still couldn't pay it off! Terrifying.

"What's the deadline? And what happens if you can't pay it?" I asked.

"I've got two hours left. If I can't do it, they're sending me to do hard labor on Tarmein III. There are so many former pirates there. If they sent a mercenary like me there…" Tears spilled down her cheeks. "I was ready to die in space with my ship. But…not this!"

"Elma… Oh, Master Hiro!" Mimi trembled, sobbing harder than Elma as she held the elf. Her eyes were wide and pleading when she looked up at me.

I crossed my arms. *Hmm. Saving her would be simple enough. If money really is the answer, I can just pay off her debt and be done with it.*

It was easy, but not appealing. If I went that route I'd be left with just 300,000 Ener to my name. That might be fine for most folks, but it just wasn't a reliable safety net when you had a ship to operate and maintain. Sure, small repairs and resupplies wouldn't be a problem, but what if something happened and the ship got damaged? *I'd need to earn some cash fast. Maybe another pirate hunt?*

Mimi was still begging me with those big brown eyes of hers. *Gah, don't look at me like that!*

I had never planned to push help onto Elma, but this was something else entirely. She was desperate. She might even choose suicide over getting sent to that prison camp and made into a pirates' plaything. I shuddered to imagine it. None of her options were particularly promising.

In the end, I really had no choice. Mimi and I owed Elma a debt of gratitude. Plus, how could we possibly sleep at night knowing we'd left her to that kind of fate? Maybe Elma would be indignant at the offer of help, but this was my life and I would live it as I saw fit.

"Elma," I began.

"…What?" she snapped.

"Come and be a member of my crew."

“Huh?”

“I’ll pay off the 3,000,000. In exchange, you can work with us. Specifically, I want you to teach Mimi the basics of being a mercenary and occasionally support me.”

“H-hold on. Are you for real?” She blinked with shock, but I ignored her and checked my handheld terminal. Two hours…that meant her deadline was 3:00 p.m.

“Make your decision; we don’t have long,” I said. “Either you join my crew or you go to a prison station and the pirates get you.”

I hoped that making her options stark would help bypass her stubbornness. Being indebted to me probably wasn’t an attractive option given Elma’s pride, but she couldn’t possibly refuse.

“Wh-why?” Elma asked in disbelief.

“Mimi’s gonna be sad if I don’t. Besides, I’ll never sleep again if I let someone who helped me rot in jail. And most of all, I just want you. I think you could really help us out.”

Sure, she’d messed up this time, but Elma was still a veteran with five years of combat experience as a mercenary. It wasn’t only Mimi whom she could show a thing or two. She had managed to pilot that insane ship, after all. She could certainly pilot the Krishna and having backup like that would be a huge asset. Mimi was a long, long way from being able to take over for me in the cockpit.

“M-me? Really?!” A blush flushed Elma’s face. Her long ears twitched. Mimi went wide-eyed as well.

I wasn’t sure what the big deal was, but I sought to reassure them. “Yeah. Of course.”

“H-huh. D-do you really see me like that?” Elma fidgeted from foot to foot. *See you like what?*

“Sure, I guess?” I shrugged. I liked to call her a poor little space elf, but in reality she was smart and capable. She knew a ton of useful stuff about this colony. All of her advice since I met her had been spot on, including the stuff she’d done for Mimi. And anyway, it wasn’t really her fault that ship had gone on a rampage.

“I-I see. But what about Mimi?” Elma said.

“What’s wrong with having one more?” I said. “You agree, right, Mimi?”

“I agree,” Mimi said.

“O-oh, okay. One isn’t enough for you?” Strangely, Elma gulped and watched me under her eyelashes. Why was she acting so weird? Was I just imagining it?

“So, what’s it gonna be? You on board or not?” I said.

“Y-yeah. I am,” she said.

“Well, welcome to the crew. Make sure you do your job, all right?”

“O-okay. Be gentle though, okay?”

“Huh? No way. You’re gonna work hard.”

What was she going on about? This was 3,000,000 Ener we were talking about here! Converted to yen, that’s 300,000,000. She couldn’t seriously expect to laze around.

“O-oh. I get it,” she said. “I’ll be ready, then. Sounds a lot better than being with who knows how many pirates, anyway.”

I was definitely still missing something here, but whatever. The important thing now was just to go to the galactic police and pay off that debt.

Elma followed us to the police headquarters. All the fine print took a while, but it was pretty simple paying off the 3,000,000 Ener and getting Elma her freedom.

“Jeez,” I complained. “Look how empty my wallet is now.”

“I’m really grateful,” Elma said. “Um, I’ll do anything I can to pay you back.”

“Yeah, yeah. Do your job and I won’t charge you any interest, so take as long as you need.”

“O-okay.”

This was getting really weird. Something was getting lost in translation here. Maybe. Probably. Or it was just in my head. Who knew?

“Anyway, we’ve got some shopping to finish up,” I said. “We need groceries, and I guess we’ll have to get the essentials for you too, right?”

“A few things, maybe,” Elma said. “I can still get most of my personal stuff from the ship.”

“Good. Okay, let’s go buy what we need and get back to the ship.”

“Yes, Master Hiro,” Mimi said. All that settled, we started off. I have to admit, I felt like a total player with Mimi on my left and Elma on my right. That little elf was drop dead gorgeous. I definitely didn’t mind having a new crew member who was both attractive and helpful. Not that I was planning to make a move or anything. In any case, my wallet was 3,000,000 Ener lighter, which put all of us in a delicate position. Starting tomorrow, our week of lazing around would end. It was time to get to work.

***

“Incidentally, what became of that mercenary who damaged the battleship?” I asked an assistant.

“Oh, do you mean the elf, Lieutenant Serena? Hmm… It seems she sold her ship and paid it off in full.”

“She sold it? And she already paid off her debt?”

“Yes, it seems so. Just in time, too; today was her deadline.”

“*Deadline*? Didn’t I demand that she not be penalized?”

Demanding a debt like that get paid off in just a week would be outright tyranny. I had no intention of doing that to her. She wouldn’t even be able to repair her ship in a week’s time, let alone also use it to earn that kind of cash. Plus, with the military having so much sway in this system, slapping a debt like that on someone was akin to charging them with a crime.

“Yes, I do recall,” the assistant said. “Hmm. It seems the one who filed the claim, along with its deadline, was Bariton of the accounting office.”

“That damn pig. I ought to rip him to shreds and feed him to the rest of his lot.” There was no love lost between the accountants and the mercenaries I commanded. As such, those wretches often came up with these creative little annoyances. It would be more than a mere annoyance if word of this got around and people started believing that making a mistake while working with me could get them imprisoned.

“Lieutenant Serena?”

“Oh, apologies,” I said, pulled out of my thoughts. “This is a problem, though. Investigate the matter and perhaps see if you can dethrone the king of those swine.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

How in the world had that elf paid a fine like that in such a short time? Maybe mercenary work was more profitable than I thought. *Should I change jobs…?*

Chapter 9:
Elma

WE PREPARED an early dinner that night. Elma hadn't had a substantial meal in a few days.

"Strange…" Elma mused.

"What, you don't like it?" I asked. "This dinner is special, y'know. It's made with food cartridges *and* artificial meat."

"Not that! I mean, everything is strange!" Elma jumped up from her chair, knocking it down in the process. "Why is a mercenary ship this luxurious?!" She jabbed a finger at our shiny new cooking equipment. *Well, that was rude.*

"I just think it's important to have a nice living space," I said. "Good food, tidy room, clean and spiffy bed. That will positively affect your mental health while living here."

"I get the logic, okay?! But it's like we're in a luxury liner or something!"

"I'm just using the money I earned. In my opinion, we got some good bargains thanks to Mimi here."

"Tee hee!" Mimi swelled with pride.

"Nngh!" Elma pouted and frowned.

"Elma," I said, putting an edge in my voice.

"What?"

"Forget what you're used to and get used to this. You live here now."

"Urk. Okay." She went on muttering for a moment (something about tarnishing the image of a true mercenary) but eventually settled down and dug in alongside me and Mimi.

The Steel Chef 5 was truly an impressive beast of a machine. High-quality food cartridges didn't hurt either. Even though we were eating the

same artificial meat I'd prepared in the old cooker, it was noticeably better now. The right equipment really could make a huge difference.

"Good, right?" I asked.

"It's so good that it makes me wonder what I've been eating all my life," Elma said.

"I agree," I said.

"Me too," Mimi added.

Thus was the power of the Steel Chef. What a machine. Part of me worried I'd never be able to stomach anything else, like I'd get spoiled and accept no other artificial steak. Everything from the seasoning to the spices to the cooking itself was just perfect. How could I ever again settle for less?

After the scrumptious meal, we took turns using the bath.

"Mimi, show Elma how to use it," I said. "If you want, heck, you could just bathe together."

"Hmm, true. Shall we?" Mimi offered.

"How to use it…? Um, sure, I don't mind." Three baths could end up using a lot of water, except that this bath had an efficient water purifier built in so it could reuse water and waste far less. I got through my own bath and then threw on a T-shirt and shorts. I found Mimi and Elma back in the dining area, heads close together as they whispered conspiratorially.

"I'm done," I said. "You can go ahead."

"Eep!"

"Eagh?!" Elma yelped as she startled up out of her seat. What was her problem?! She sounded like a frightened bird. "Th-that was fast!"

"Not really. Hey, are you okay? You look pale."

"Y-yes, I'm fine! No problems at all!"

"A-all right." I looked to Mimi for help, but all I got was a vague smile. *What is going on here?* An uneasy feeling gnawed at me. *There's a major misunderstanding here; I can feel it.*

"Master Hiro, Elma and I are going to take a bath."

“Oh, yeah. Have fun.” I watched them leave, searching for clues, but I was left utterly perplexed. Why did Elma seem so scared? Even Mimi wasn’t her usual bubbly self.

No sense in wasting energy on it. I wasn’t going to crack this mystery. All I could do was move forward. I pushed the weirdness aside and focused on the situation at hand as I returned to my room. After today, we were super low on cash. Given how much damage a ship could take in battle, I’d feel far better having 1,000,000 Ener on hand, at least. I needed to start earning money.

“Hmm…” I hemmed and hawed as I scrolled through the jobs available from the guild. Nothing too promising there. Most of them required a transport ship, a resource I obviously lacked. It was a shame. Looked like you could make between 1,000,000 and 3,000,000 Ener just by moving goods from Tarmein Prime to dangerous sectors two or three star systems away. Sadly, the Krishna couldn’t carry much at all. The ship just didn’t have the cargo space to make this a worthwhile venture.

“Gotta farm bounties, I guess…” In the aftermath of a raid like the one we just conducted, a lot of folks would be looking to take advantage of the decreased police presence here, especially smaller clusters of pirates. Pirates weren’t exactly a coherent organization; opportunists were sure to sweep in now.

“I should go for the asteroid belt.” That was where the resources were, so that was where the pirates would go. Tomorrow, I could look there for pirates with bounties on their heads.

Okay, next problem: which asteroid? The Belbellum Federation had a heavy police presence even in peacetime; no pirates to be found there. The police here were still picking through the ships we’d destroyed on our mission, so I didn’t want to go near that battlefield either.

“Hmm, here? Or there? Or maybe here?” I narrowed down the places they would frequent, but *places they would frequent* and *places with an easy score for a pirate* were two different things. They didn’t just want a place lacking police; they also wanted a place with some mining ships worth hitting. Wherever we went hunting for pirates, it needed to have both.

“This is rough.” I opened the map of the Tarmein System and searched, but I struggled to narrow down useful mining spots. Maybe a

blind guess was my best chance. Couldn't be much worse odds than what I faced now.

I was still puzzling it out when my bedroom door creaked open.

"Hm? What's up? You could at least knock," I said. Elma entered wearing something very casual—and very *thin*. Whoa. Did she even have underwear on? I gaped and Elma blushed, covering her chest with her arms.

"H-here I am," she said.

"Huh?" I raised an eyebrow, but Elma just kept staring at me through the heat lighting up her face. *No, seriously, what is going on? Did she come here just to stare at me?*

"So that's your plan, is it?" she said.

"Umm…?"

Elma heaved a sigh, sauntered past me at my desk, and sat on my bed. The bed that had plenty of space for me, Mimi, and more. *Y'know, I don't appreciate her making this so weird.*

"Go on. Do it," she commanded.

"Bwuh?"

"I said, *do it*! Do what you're gonna do to me!"

"What?!"

"You said you wanted me, right?! That's why you paid 3,000,000 to have me on your crew, isn't it?! I knew that was all you wanted!"

"Uhhh…" Suddenly her strange reactions all day flashed through my mind. *Okay, I did say I wanted Elma. Those were words that were said. But I also said I wanted her to teach Mimi and support me, right? Maybe she thought I meant that in a weird, sexual way?*

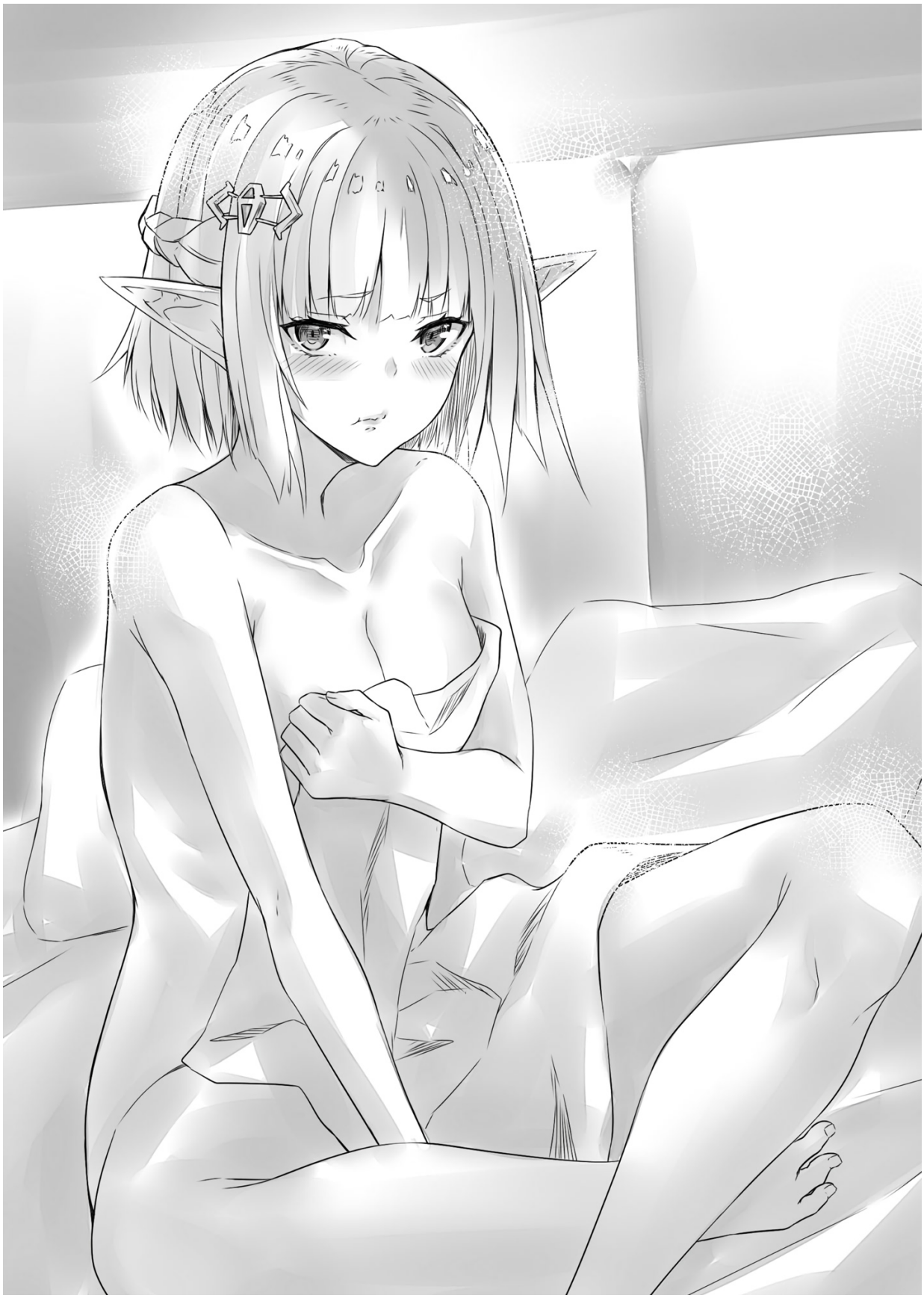
At least now I kind of understood all of Elma's strange behavior.

I looked her up and down again as she trembled on my bed. I mean, she was definitely beautiful. Fine skin. A slender form with small, perky breasts pushing at her showy dress. Her elfin face had lovely, delicate features, and her hair framed her face in silky strands. Still, Elma and I clearly had different ideas about what was going on here. Would it be rude to say no?

“All right, then. I’ll do my best to make sure you don’t regret this,” I said.

“Ulp! G-gently though, okay?” she said.

“I’ll do what I can,” I said, stroking Elma’s hair to ease her jitters. Then, I joined the slender girl in bed…



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"Beast."

"…"

"Brute. Philanderer."

"You consented."

"Ngh…" Elma battered my chest with her little hands. *Cute.* "I'm not even worth being with, am I?"

"Nonsense," I said. "That was incredible. I loved it."

"You beast."

"I'd say it's the rabbit's fault for misunderstanding and coming to offer herself up to the wolf… Oww! Don't pinch me there."

Puffing up her cheeks as she lay on my chest, Elma pinched me hard.

"I think it's more honest to come out and say it, don't you think?" I said.

"An honest person would've said something before it came to this," she said.

"If I did that, I would've embarrassed the heck out of you. Would you really want that?"

"You have an answer for everything, huh? Meanie," Elma said, pressing a bruising kiss against my mouth.

"Ow!" I yelped.

"Hmph." I could really do without the biting that accompanied every kiss. It hurt! "Well, what's done is done. There's no point in me being indecisive now."

"I enjoyed it! Seriously, I'm really satisfied." I studied her, eager to see if she'd enjoyed it as well.

She blushed and looked away. "…It wasn't bad. You were gentle, I'll give you that."

"Nice."

“Nice what?” This time, her vicious pinches targeted my side.

“Ow, ow, ouchie!” *Stop hurting me, dang it!* “Keep teasing me and I’ll fight back.”

“Try it, see what happens.”

“Is that a threat or an invitation?” Maybe all this teasing was just foreplay for her. *I might as well meet the challenge.*

***

I slipped out of bed the next morning, leaving Elma there to sleep. After a bath, I found Mimi at the table in the dining room.

“Good morning,” I greeted.

“Morning.” She was just sitting there, stationary and empty-eyed. Uh-oh.

“…”

Mimi stared down at her hands, which lay folded in her lap. What was going on? Oh, shoot. Was she scared of being abandoned again?

“H-hey, um…” she began.

“Now, now.” I got her up out of her chair and encouraged her along to the bathroom. It looked like she needed a little love and attention. Gotta take care of the people we care about, right?

***

“Beast.”

“Hey, thanks. You can count on me any time.”

“That wasn’t a compliment!” Elma yelled from where she was sitting across from me. Mimi sat beside me in the dining room, nestled under my arm.

“After all we did yesterday, you’re all over Mimi this morning! You’ve got some nerve, bub!” Elma said.

“I value equality,” I said.

“Equa—?!” Elma was not buying it.

“We’re all crewmates, so let’s get along. What’s the problem with that?” I asked.

“Y-you’re one to talk, buddy.”

“Do you hate Mimi, Elma?”

“Huh?! N-no, I don’t.”

“Then I’d say we’re all good,” I said. “Besides, you knew about my relationship with Mimi before you came aboard. Kinda weird to make a big deal out of it now.”

“But! Ngh, you’re right, but…” Elma said.

“We can all get along and be happy. That’s all we need.”

“It feels kinda like you’re toying with me.”

“Pssh, not at all!” I flashed a smile. If Mimi and I were okay with it, then Elma should be, too. It was only the three of us living here, after all.

“Anyway, that’s enough of that,” I said.

“*Anyway?* Eh, whatever. I don’t need to waste my breath arguing with you. So what now?”

“I’d like to discuss our plans for the future.”

“Sounds like a serious topic.”

“It is, a little. First, we need to start making money as soon as possible. I still have savings, but if the ship gets damaged or destroyed, we’re in deep crap.”

“Well…” Elma started to say something but clammed up fast. We all knew paying off her debt had depleted my funds.

“So we have two choices,” I said. “First, we could leave this star system to find some profitable work.”

“We can’t find anything here?” Mimi asked.

“There’s less work here with the pirates gone, and this place just smells fishy in general. I think it’d be better to try a different system.”

“Agreed,” Elma said. “Tensions between the Empire and the Federation are getting worse these days, so systems near the border could get caught up in it. If we want to be safe, then moving is definitely the right call.”

“Yeah. But here’s our other option,” I said. “We stay in this system, hunt the pirate stragglers in the asteroid belt, and wait for war to break out. Demand for pirates will skyrocket during a war. It’ll be dangerous since we’ll be up against a real enemy fleet, but the pay will be enormous.”

“It is true that the pirate stragglers should be a lot more active now, since police are more lax after a large-scale pirate extermination,” Elma said. “But they’ll also be harder to find and have better gear, which means their bounties should be a lot bigger. Adding in the possibility of war, that makes this one high-risk, high-reward strategy.”

“Both sound feasible,” Mimi said. “What should we do?”

“Well, I was thinking we should talk about that now. Mimi, what are your thoughts?” I said.

Mimi pondered in silence for a moment. “I think staying in this system is a good idea.”

“Oh? Why’s that?”

“With your skill and the Krishna’s capabilities, slightly stronger pirates won’t pose a threat. And if we get caught up in a war we can’t win, we can always flee.”

“Very good points,” I agreed. “A war starting doesn’t necessarily mean that we have to fight in it.” She was right; we could absolutely choose to run instead of fight. Pirates would be wreaking havoc during a war. We could either stay and fight them or tuck our tail and run.

“I’d suggest staying in this system, too,” Elma added. “Your skill ought to bring us success if we go to war. The pirates won’t even stand a chance.”

“Wow. You too, Elma?”

“Yes. Me too,” Elma stated bluntly. It was nice to hear a veteran like her compliment my skill like that.

“Well, it sounds like it’s decided,” I said.

“Do you agree, too, Master Hiro?” Mimi said.

“My perspective is a little different, but yes,” I said. “If we were planning to travel, I would prefer to have more cash on hand first. You never know what might happen during long-distance travel, and we haven’t even decided where to go yet.”

“Fair enough. How much do you have now?” Elma asked.

“About 300,000.”

“Yeah, that’s a little precarious. Well, let’s get out there and make some money.”

With nods all around, we prepared for departure.

Chapter 10:
The Bad Luck Band

WE SET TO WORK right away. The plan was simple enough: scope out the asteroid belt, corner any pirates we found, and take them out. By lowering our generator output, we could hide near mining ships and wait in ambush whenever a pirate came sniffing around.

As soon as we got started, we found success. We were taking out ten ships a day, scooping up their cargo in the process. The bounties ranged from 10,000 to 30,000 Ener. We even found a pirate hauling around Rare Metal once. Score! In total, our first week earned us 1,780,000 Ener. That included loot, gear, and all those juicy bounties. Mimi still got her standard 0.5 percent, for a total of 12,800 Ener (including her take from our earlier mission). Elma's share was 3 percent or 53,400 Ener. As for me? I ended up with about 2,000,000 Ener, more than enough to keep us secure and provide a nice safety net for our finances.

"Big money today, everyone! Cheers!" Elma cried. She was positively giddy as she raised her booze in a toast. She chugged it down in a single gulp. I couldn't help watching the way her throat bobbed as she swallowed. They called this particular drink "beer," but with no carbonation it felt more like ale to me.

"Yeah, yeah. Cheers." Personally, I'd passed on the beer. Ale. Whatever it was. I drank chilled tea instead. I could have indulged, but I'd pass out pretty quick. Never was much of a drinker.

"Wow, Hiro. What's wrong? You a little baaaby?" Elma teased.

"Shut up!" I said. "I can't help my genetics. Drinking doesn't make you an adult, anyway."

Elma wrapped her arm around my shoulder and snuggled in close. Seemed she was the annoying kind of drunk, excitable and touchy.

"You seem to be enjoying yourself, Elma," Mimi said.

"I am! I feel like I'm on top of the world!"

“Don’t be like her,” I said.

“Okay.” Mimi eyed the bottle, but I warned her away from it. This system didn’t place age restrictions on alcohol consumption, but I knew it wasn’t good for young people and Mimi was still young. *Er, wait. Am I a monster for being with her?* Well…we had both consented. When I looked it up, I found that the law in this universe was consent and a minimum age of fifteen. So legally at least I was in the clear.

“You’re pretty darn good at this, buddy,” Elma said. “The ship’s great and all, but you really know how to fly it. You’re a pro at setting up those ambushes, too.”

“I guess my muscles remember, even if my mind doesn’t,” I said. “I’m not really sure how, but I seem to have good reflexes and battle sense.”

“Hmm… Are you hiding something from us?” Elma said.

“Not at all,” I said, deadpan, as Elma’s eyes bored into me. I couldn’t give up my secrets right now. Telling them I was from another universe and that this one was all a video game to me wouldn’t help any of us. In fact, at this point I was beginning to wonder if this really *was* the universe of *Stella Online*, or if it was somewhere entirely different. I recognized ships, goods, and other details from the game, but stuff like the star systems and galactic empires were brand new to me. I simply didn’t have enough information right now to say for sure.

That wasn’t the only conversation I was delaying, though. Elma and Mimi got along strangely well. I wasn’t ready to bring up their relationship yet.

“Ah, fine,” Elma said. “We’ve all got our secrets. Right, Mimi?”

“Hm? Not me,” Mimi responded.

“Wow, really? How about your weight—”

“Aaaah! Stop, stop, don’t say it!” Mimi shouted, flustered, and Elma laughed.

Her weight, eh? I just figured all her body fat gathered in her breasts, instead of her stomach. Those melons had to add some weight to her petite frame.

“Mimi,” I said.

“Yes?”

“Trust the trainer. Absolutely avoid any unnecessary weight loss.”

“Okay…” Mimi blushed and covered her red face with both hands. Honestly, I feared she was getting too skinny. *Maybe I ought to re-calibrate the training room’s AI in secret? Hmm…*

“Oh!” I said, “By the way, about tomorrow…”

“Tomorrow?” Mimi said.

“Yeah, about tomorrow, I was thinking we ought to take the day off and go shopping together. Gotta take a breather sometimes.”

“A…breather?” Mimi cocked her head at the colloquialism.

“Yeah. We’ll get tired of hunting pirates if we just go around making money but never enjoying it. Let’s grab some good food and drinks, buy some personal things, and maybe get some clothes or accessories. There are plenty of worthwhile ways to spend our cash.”

“Sounds to me like you just wanna slack off.” Elma teased, but she was right.

“That’s totally part of it,” I admitted. “Overwork can lead to mistakes that you won’t notice until it’s too late. Besides, I’d like Mimi to experience using her own hard-earned money for stuff she wants.”

“Oh, I getcha. Yeah, that’s important.” Elma suddenly turned serious. Even flushed from the ale, she abruptly shed some of her drunkenness.

“Umm, I…” Mimi squirmed.

I could understand her discomfort. She’d been handed 17,100 Ener, or 1,710,000 yen. That was a big paycheck at her age.

“All I’m doing is sitting in the operator’s seat,” she said. “This is too much…”

“I know you’re still learning, but you’re part of the crew,” I said. “You risk your life the same as me and Elma. That’s a fair reward, I promise.”

“He’s right,” Elma said. “You don’t have to be modest, especially since that pay includes your *services* to him.”

“I mean, if you don’t like doing it—” I said.

“Nobody said that!” Mimi said.

“It’s not true at all!” Elma said.

Elma and Mimi shouted their objections over each other. Mimi blushed with her eyes fixed on me, while Elma looked away entirely, her ears going red to the tips.

“Master Hiro, I love you from the bottom of my heart,” Mimi said. “I mean it. You are everything to me, and I would offer every last bit of myself to you.” Mimi leaned over the table as she spoke, just like a heartfelt, dramatic love confession from a movie or novel. And it was for *me*. Was I dreaming?

“Uhhh…I-I wouldn’t go that far, but you did save me,” Elma said. “If not for you, I’d be in awful trouble right now, so I-I kinda owe you. Um… I’m grateful to you. Not that I don’t think you’re a good guy. If I didn’t, I wouldn’t do all that stuff with you, regardless of whether you saved me or not…dummy.” Part of me had feared they’d been with me only out of duty, like they had to pay me back that way. Their confessions lifted a huge weight off my shoulders.

“H-hey, why are you crying?” Elma said.

“M-master Hiro?” Mimi said.

“Gah, sorry,” I said, swiping at the tears on my cheeks. “I’m just really glad that’s how you both feel. Honestly, I…I was a little worried.”

“Worried? Why?” Mimi said.

“Pssh, stupid. What girl wouldn’t be won over by a prince in shining armor who saved her life?” Elma chuckled and kissed me on the cheek. “Without you, I’d be stuck in prison. You kept me out of that hell hole, so you’re my prince. Don’t worry about it, ’kay?”

“M-me too, Master Hiro! If you didn’t save my life, who knows what would’ve happened? You’re my hero. My Hiro!” Mimi stepped around the table to wrap me up in a hug. Alcohol soured her breath. Wait, had she had some by mistake?

“Mimi, let’s show our prince here how we feel about him,” Elma said.

“O-okay! I’ll do my best!” Mimi said.

They each grabbed me by the shirt and dragged me up. I let them pull me along gladly.

***

When the sun rose the following day, we were all cuddled up together in my bed.

“So, how about that shopping?” Elma proposed immediately.

“Yay!” Mimi chimed in.

“How are you two so energetic?” After spending the whole night having fun, I couldn’t believe they weren’t at least a little worn out, but both Elma and Mimi were bursting with energy. *Are they literally sucking the life out of me?*

“Master Hiro?” Mimi cocked her head.

“Er, nothing. Sorry. Let’s go.”

“Okay!”

We rolled out of bed. After we’d washed and dressed, Mimi pulled me along through the hangar bay toward the high-speed elevator. We leaned against the glass of the elevator, watching space drift by as the familiar sights of the Third Division rose to greet us.

“Mimi, are you scared at all?” I asked.

“I’m okay! I have you and Elma, along with this laser gun.” She patted the laser on her hip with a smile. I really hoped she’d never have to use it. *Maybe I ought to have Elma teach her martial arts?*

“So, do we have anywhere we wanna go?” Elma said.

“Nope,” I said. “This all happened on a whim. Is there anywhere you particularly want to go? You were looking up the shops around here before, right, Mimi?”

“Oh, yes! I was.” Mimi took out her terminal and tapped through it. “The most interesting places are mercenary gadget shops. It looks like they sell stuff you can use inside the ship. There are also firearms dealers and import shops.”

“The gadget shops sound neat. But why the firearms dealers?”

“I want to be able to protect myself when things get rough so I won’t hold you back. I know I don’t have any combat training like you two, but they might have something even I can use.”

Wow, she really thought about this. “Combat training” was probably a stretch for me. Piloting wasn’t the same as hand-to-hand combat with some criminal in an alley. Mimi didn’t realize it, but I could use some extra self-defense myself.

“I’ve been to one of those import shops,” Elma said. “They’ve got some obscure foods that most grocery stores don’t carry—and booze, which grocers don’t stock. It’s kinda fun!”

“Oh, that sounds great,” I said. “Let’s go there. I’m interested in the firearms dealer, too, so let’s add that to the list. Where should we start?”

“The gadget shop is the closest,” Mimi said.

“Sounds like a good place to start.”

Mimi led the way, watching the map on her terminal as she guided us through the Third Division. Much of the Third Division was dangerous, but the galactic police had set up shop in the area near the elevators and the gate to the Second Division, so those places were quite a bit safer. Good ol’ Oishii Mart stood roughly on the border between “not too bad” and “better watch your back.”

“This seems to be it,” Mimi said as we stepped up to a remarkably ordinary building.

“That one right there?” I looked for something off, but the glass front display merely showed mannequins in anti-g-force suits. Not entirely “normal” but not as weird as I expected.

“Come in!” the shopkeeper called as we entered. He sat behind a counter, looking more like a bodyguard than a cashier. The shop itself wasn’t all that big, about the size of a convenience store perhaps, but

surveillance cameras were mounted on the walls, constantly watching for attempts at shoplifting.

"Brought your girlies, huh?" the shopkeeper said.

"Are they not allowed in?" I said.

"Nah, that's not it. Not so much the little one, but you two look like some real seasoned mercenaries."

"Oh yeah, how d'ya figure that?"

"It's experience, my man," he said. "Anyway, we've got a wide selection, so take your time and have a look. If you need any help, let me know." He waved dismissively and returned to whatever was on his tablet. I found it kind of rude, but maybe this was ordinary outside of Japan. Maybe *I* was the weird one for striking up a conversation right away.

"Y'know, there's a lot of stuff here that I just…cannot identify," I said.

I picked up a weird can, turning it over in my hands. It only cost 3 Ener. *Get that cockpit smelling fresh! You'll never smell like cigarettes again!* Air freshener, seriously? Strips of double-sided tape were affixed to the underside of the can so it could be attached to a dashboard. *Some things never change, huh?*

"Master Hiro, could we find any use for these anti-g-force suits?" Mimi asked.

"Nah. The Krishna's cockpit is constructed to cancel out some of the g-force from acceleration and quick rotation, so we don't need them. You haven't felt any g-force worth fainting over yet, have you?"

"That is true, but…I thought they looked rather stylish." Disappointment sobered some of her excitement. I had to admit, the design was pretty cool, but our life support systems were more than up to the task of handling g-force. *Sorry, but we simply don't need them.*

"This is neat, isn't it?" Elma headed over carrying some sort of techno-looking ball. I had no idea how it could possibly be useful.

"What is it?" I said.

“It’s a gravity sphere. They’re really convenient.” Lifting the sphere in front of her, she pressed a button and the ball whirred with waking machinery.

“What happens next?” I said.

“Then you do this.” She pulled a straw out of the sphere. Placing the straw between her lips, Elma released the sphere. It kept floating in front of her, not held up by anything. A neat trick and all, but I didn’t really get what the practical use was.

“Okay, I have no idea what’s going on,” I said. “I’ve never seen one of these before.”

“You put a drink in it and then you can drink any time during battle. And look!” Elma did a quick twirl in place. The gravity sphere followed her.

“So it’s a bottle that stays in midair?” I said.

“Yep!” she said. “Press the Stay button and it floats in place for three seconds before following the closest object. These babies can withstand high g-forces with no issue. It’ll never spill, and it automatically keeps your drink at the perfect temperature.”

“So this is what people mean when they say modern technology is a waste of money. But, er, I guess it’s convenient.” I poked the gravity sphere as it hovered near Elma’s shoulder. It recoiled quite a bit but wobbled right back into place. What a strange little device. “It must be expensive, right?”

“They’re 500 Ener each.”

“That’s…not bad.” Five hundred Ener was 50,000 yen in Japan, a pretty outrageous price for what amounted to a super fancy water bottle. Maybe if you accounted for the technology inside that thing it was a steal in this universe. I wasn’t sure, but either way 500 Ener was barely pocket change to me.

“It *is* convenient,” I agreed. “Maybe I’ll get one.”

“I will, too.”

“Let’s just call it equipment for the ship. How about we pick up six for all of us to share?” I said.

“Really? I’ll take you up on that.” Elma smiled sweetly. *Urk!* That smile of hers was devastating. I looked away, bashful, and heard her giggle as she headed to the counter.

Nothing else really caught my eye. The shop carried plenty of strange, interesting things, but none we particularly needed. We paid up front at the counter and sent the order to the ship before moving on to the next shop.

“Next up is the firearms dealer,” Mimi said.

“Firearms, eh?” I said. “For some reason, even just the word gets me excited.”

“Boys will be boys.” Elma shook her head.

It turned out the firearms dealer was right next to the gadget shop.

“It’s a little…loud,” I said.

“I mean, it’s a gun shop,” Elma said. Iron bars protected the front display windows of the shop. Even the door looked heavy and guarded. It opened automatically with a heavy groaning noise.

“Aww, yeah. This is the good stuff,” I said.

The guns instantly caught my eye. The store also carried custom parts, interchangeable energy packs, and holsters for every size and shape of weapon. An old man with sharp eyes watched us ogle the wares from the counter.

“Kid, we sell *weapons* here,” he said. “Stuff that *kills* people. You don’t bring your little girlies in here on a date.”

“Don’t worry about us,” I said. “We’ll be quiet.”

“Hmph.” The guy went back to disassembling the gun on his counter, but he didn’t put up any further protest. *None of the shopkeepers around here seem very interested in customer service…*

“Do you have combat equipment?” Elma asked me.

“A little. It’s not stuff I use much, though, so I stashed it in the cargo hold.”

“Hmm. Well, mercs don’t fight much in person.”

“All the more reason to have a backup plan.” I hefted a laser rifle off its display. What in the world was this thing made of? It almost felt light enough to break the first time you fired it. How had they managed that?

Meanwhile, Mimi examined the handgun lasers. She tried out a few, just feeling their weight and grips in her hands.

“You don’t wanna look around?” Elma asked.

“Nah, I’ve already got this bad boy.” I patted the laser at my hip.

“I’ve never seen a design like that. Who made it?”

“Oh, uh, sorry, I don’t really remember. Y’know, memory loss.” Yikes! I couldn’t exactly tell her I’d won it in an in-game tournament from *Stella Online*.

“Ooh, yeah. Sorry. Does it need maintenance?” Elma said.

“I don’t remember ever tinkering with it.”

“Jeez, buddy. How about we ask the shopkeeper just to be safe?”

“Good idea.”

The shopkeeper looked up when we approached, those sharp eyes narrowing. *I don’t like that glint in your eye, my guy!*

“Whaddya want?” he asked curtly.

“Um, well, I don’t know how to perform maintenance on my gun. Could I possibly get you to teach me?” I placed the gun—still in its holster—on the counter before him.

The man glowered but eased the gun out of its holster. Instantly, his eyes flew wide. “Th-this is from Mandas Corp! And it’s the Gunslinger Champion’s model!” He nearly knocked over his chair as he jumped to his feet. Was this guy okay? He trembled, seeming on the verge of collapse. “Kid…I mean, buddy, can you shoot this?!”

“Huh? Uh, yeah. Is that a problem?” I’d fired it to save Mimi. Both she and Elma had witnessed it.

“Well, I suppose that means you’re the rightful owner, after all.” He sat back down with a heavy sigh, closing his eyes as though the whole ordeal had exhausted him infinitely.

“Hey, Elma? Why’s he so surprised?” I said.

“I dunno,” she said. “Mandas Corp only makes one-off, super-high-quality weapons. Is that really a Mandas gun?”

“The details are beyond me,” I said. “It does seem better than the ones you can pick up in any old shop, though.”

“Obviously!” the man howled. “It’s a limited model from Mandas Corp! You’ll never find a better gun than this in all the galaxy, boy!” He thrust my gun back at me.

“Wh-what about the maintenance?” I said.

“That thing doesn’t need maintenance! It could get scratched or chipped, and the nanomachines inside it would fix it immediately. You’d best not mess with it. Nobody but you can fire that thing now.”

“Huh, wow.”

Looked like this gun was even better than I imagined. In *Stella Online*, you couldn’t trade it or even give it away, but I never could have fathomed how that would translate into this universe. Suddenly, I appreciated my little laser gun a heck of a lot more. *Maybe it deserves a polish once in a while*.

Mimi browsed a few different guns but ultimately stuck with the one the mercenary guild had given her. In the end, we left with just some cleaning cloths and backup energy packs before heading for our next stop.

“Next up was the import shop, right?” I asked.

“Yes! They handle many obscure foods.” Mimi was especially excited for this one. Small wonder, given her dream of trying all the foods in the galaxy.

“You can’t go wrong with food, I guess,” I said.

“Yep.” Elma smirked. What was she so smiley about?

I didn’t have to wait long to find out.

“M-m-master Hiro, look…” Quivering, Mimi pointed at an animal cage. Something I could only describe as a facehugger thrashed against the bars, whipping around gnarled legs that horrifyingly resembled human fingers. An appendage like a cross between a tentacle and a scorpion tail

beat against the cage. I had no clue what this thing was, but I knew I never wanted to get anywhere near it.

"It's live food that rich people eat," Elma said. "Wanna try it?"

"I think I'll pass…"

"There's also a processed version." She held up a packet of vacuum-sealed facehugger.

"Urgh!"

People eat this stuff? No way.

"They say militaries in other systems use them as rations," Elma said. "You can eat the whole thing, from top to bottom."

"Is it…good?" I said.

"Who knows? I've never tried it, but it's nutritious as all get out." Elma shrugged. I looked to Mimi for help, but she just shook her head. *Good point, Mimi. I couldn't handle this, either.* Horribly, Elma continued, "If you wanna eat everything in the galaxy, this is, like, the basics."

"We're beginners, okay? Let's start easy and work our way up," I said.

"Y-yes, I agree!" Mimi said. "Oh, Master Hiro, they're selling very tasty-looking meat over there!"

"Ooh, let's take a look!"

We fled from Elma as she closed in on us with the vacuum-packed monstrosity. *We're not running away. We're just charging toward a different objective, I swear!*

"Is this cartoon meat?!" I was in awe. The massive cylinder of meat sitting on a single huge bone truly looked like something from a cartoon. "About three kilograms each for seventy-six Ener. It's already cooked, so you can just chow down on it. Not bad."

"The package says it's smoked," Mimi added.

"Okay, let's buy it. I'd love some."

"Yes, sir!"

Seventy-six hundred yen for some cartoon meat. Not cheap, but I couldn't resist! I didn't even know what kind of meat it was, but I'd worry about that later. It was probably just the artificial stuff, anyway.

"I'll buy this with my own pay," Mimi said.

"Nope. If everyone's eating it, I'm buying it," I said. "It's only fair."

"Sir, I want to make this my first purchase with my first paycheck. I'm happy to share." Mimi pleaded with me with her eyes. Seemed like she was really serious about this.

"All right. Well, thank you for treating me," I said.

"Yes, sir! Thank you!" Mimi proudly placed the vacuum-packed cartoon meat in our basket.

As for Elma…her basket mostly held alcohol.

"Guess I'll take a look around, too." I felt safe leaving Mimi behind and wandering around on my own. This store had it all, from nauseating edible live worms to actual Kobe beef. *Wait, Kobe beef! Why do they have Kobe beef?!* The store didn't list a source, yet it seemed Kobe beef existed all over this galaxy. That quality came at a high price: 1,000 Ener per hundred grams, with better cuts costing even more. Whew. I'd love to have some, but that price tag was a bit too rich for my blood.

Elma caught me gawking at the beef. "You've got the money to treat yourself, y'know."

"Three hundred grams of this would cost as much as I earned from downing an entire pirate ship. I can't eat that every day… Wait. Can I?"

"With how fast you earn, *yeah*, you can," Elma said.

"No, no, no. Luxury is the enemy! There's plenty of cheaper stuff out there that tastes just as good. I'm satisfied with artificial meat." For comparison, artificial steak typically cost five Ener per hundred grams. The Kobe beef cost at least two hundred times that! There was no way I could justify it.

"That's true," Elma said. "More expensive doesn't necessarily mean better." She shrugged and turned away. Wait. Was there one of those vacuum-packed facehuggers in her basket? Did I imagine it? I shuddered and resolved to pretend I'd seen nothing.

Instead, I turned my attention to the drinks. Lots of flavors but a total lack of the one thing I really hoped to see. *Soda, guys! Where's the soda?!*

"Wait, what's this?!"

I found a bottle labeled *Koke* that contained a dark liquid. Could this be it? Could my favorite soda be right here before my very eyes? Was my quest over already?

I seized the bottle and dashed for the register. The employee pulled back a little at my aggressive approach, but I just pressed ahead with my purchase and rushed back outside. The moment I cracked open the bottle, a familiar scent filled my nose. My heart swelled as I raised the bottle and took a swig.

"…Yep. Too good to be true." Sweetness and acidity hit my tongue. That smell wafted around my head. But one crucial thing was absent: carbonation! Once again, I was thwarted. Sure, it tasted like soda, and that was some small consolation, but it just wasn't quite the same.

Still, the moment I was done, I marched back into the store and asked the employee, "How much of this stuff do you have?"

"E-err… We have seven bottles up front and seven more cases in the back room."

"I'll take all of it." The employee blinked in shock. "All. Of. It," I pressed.

"But of course, sir!"

It wasn't true cola, but it was dang close. I paid for the haul and sent it all to the ship. This non-carbonated soda would serve as a replacement and a reminder until the glorious day I found *real* soda out here somewhere.

While I waited for Mimi and Elma, I tapped through my terminal, trying to research whether anyone had solved the carbonation problem in this universe or not. It seemed impossible, yet my search came up empty. How did a universe with such advanced technology lack this one crucial thing? Guess I'd just have to fix this issue myself.

"M-master Hiro?" Mimi said.

"He looks a little crazy around the eyes," Elma said.

“Don’t worry about me,” I said. “I was just giving up on my hopes and dreams.”

Well, I thought, *no goal worth achieving comes easy, does it?* I’d just have to face this obstacle head on. *Bring it!*

Our shopping completed, we returned to the ship to bask in our haul. The cartoon meat in particular turned out to be spectacular: filling, beautifully seasoned, perfectly textured. I wished I could have eaten more, but two kilograms was a hefty meal, way too much for any one person. Sad. I kinda wanted to chow down on it like a caveman. Oh well.

And, of course, Elma had actually bought that horrifying facehugger. I thought she was crazy, but once I mustered the courage to take a bite, it was surprisingly…*not bad*. It actually proved to be much softer than it looked, almost like crab. The insides, sweet and creamy, gushed out with each bite. The whole thing was almost like a deep-fried croquette.

“This is actually good,” I said.

“It’s a shame it looks awful,” Elma said.

Poor Mimi stared at us with slack-jawed shock as we dug into the facehugger. As for my soda, I did let the girls have a taste.

“Ew, I don’t like it,” Elma grumbled. “It tastes like medicine.”

“It’s quite sweet…” Mimi was gentler, but it was clear she wasn’t big on the soda either. Whatever. That just meant more for me! Someday, I swore, I would find carbonated soda and change their minds.

***

The next day we embarked on another hunt. We now had plenty of resources to try for a different star system if we wanted, but there were still lots of stragglers loitering around this system’s asteroid belt, so we figured we’d continue collecting bounties here.

“Weird,” Elma murmured.

“Definitely strange,” I agreed.

“Is it?” Mimi cocked her head. We waited in ambush for pirates, but what we found was a group of three ships moving like an organized squad. They didn’t look like pirates, and it seemed like they were avoiding other ships.

“What do you think?” I asked.

“Seems sketchy,” Elma said.

“Yeah.”

“Um?”

Mimi still looked confused, but the situation was already becoming clearer to me. I began to suspect this was a covert recon force from the Belbellum Federation, perhaps trying to place trackers so they could monitor the Grakkan Empire’s fleet—in other words, to monitor the police.

“That’s no good.” I shook my head. “If we move, they’ll catch us.”

“Yeah, for sure,” Elma said.

“What would happen then, you think?”

“They’d come kill us, I imagine.”

“True. That sucks.”

“Are they dangerous?” Mimi chimed in.

“Dangerous as they come, Mimi,” I said. “It’s probably Belbellum.”

“Huh?!” She analyzed the radar, watching the blips with renewed interest.

“Oh, no,” Elma said.

“Looks like they found us,” I said.

The ships shifted, spreading out to corner us. Clearly, we’d interrupted their mission and now they were coming to get rid of the witnesses. *Maybe I should’ve reduced my generator output and used the emergency cooling to run cold?*

“Welp, that’s that. Do we fight?” I said.

“You’ve got really bad luck, you know that?” Elma said.

“I don’t wanna hear that from you, Elma.”

“Hey,” she said, “Don’t pin this on me. If you wanna talk about bad luck just look at Mimi.”

“Huh? Me?!” Mimi said. Between Elma’s disastrous accident and Mimi’s staggering debt after the loss of her parents, it was a close race for which one of them had fallen on harder times. Not that that mattered right now.

“That’s enough,” I said. “It’s not the time to open old wounds.”

“T-true,” Mimi said.

“I agree,” Elma said.

“Generator output maximum,” I said. “We’re gonna fight. Mimi, ask them about their affiliation.”

“Understood, sir.”

We jumped out from where we were hiding behind the asteroid, positioning so the enemy couldn’t surround us.

“This is silver rank mercenary Captain Hiro of the Tarmein Prime mercenary guild,” Mimi announced. “Call sign Krishna. I am his operator, Mimi. To the unidentified ships approaching us, we request that you identify yourselves.” Mimi opened the communication lines, but they didn’t answer. She tried a second time, again to no effect. (As an aside, you might have noticed that my rank went from bronze to silver. That happened about three days earlier, when the guild said they couldn’t just leave me at bronze after I’d done so much work.)

“The unidentified ships have deployed their weapons,” Elma said.

“Figured as much. Let’s fight back. Deploy weapons!” I said.

“Understood,” she said. “Deploying now. As usual, I’ll take care of the chaffs, flares, and generator output.”

“Thanks. Let’s do this!” We dashed into a sharp turn, weaving through asteroids as we dove toward the closest ship.

“You love to pilot like a madman, huh?!” Elma stiffened up as we narrowly evaded obstacles.

“I’ve gotten used to it.” Mimi grinned wryly. This wasn’t madness, though. We skimmed the surface of asteroids, emerging from the shadows

to take a chunk out of the flank of an enemy ship.

“How?!” the enemy pilot shouted.

I fired off my flak cannons, sending shrapnel slicing through their shields and the belly of the ship.

“One down,” I said.

“Your flak cannons still terrify me,” Elma shuddered.

“Aren’t they great?” I said.

“You’re the only person who would use weirdo weapons like these.”

“But they’re strong!” Weird or not, my flak canons made up for their short range with huge damage. They could even challenge large craft as long as you took down the shields first.

“Fighter Two is down!” an enemy pilot screamed.

“That’s not a silver merc’s skill. Be careful! Keep your distance!” the other said.

“Well, yeah,” Elma drawled. “Typically, if you see a flak cannon you keep your distance, dummies.”

The remaining two ships, terrified of close-range battle, zipped out of the asteroid belt before wheeling around to face us. *Oh ho ho, you want a face-to-face battle? Against the Krishna, of all ships? I’d better oblige them.*

I hid the ship behind an asteroid, only the four weapons arms emerging to fire.

“Wha?! His ship has arms!”

“Those lasers are strong! I-It’s too much! We can’t take it!”

They tried to evade and fire back, but the asteroid blocked their shots and made it even easier for me to target their ships. Lasers could be easy to avoid, but I was hitting them a solid 80 percent of the time; for the Krishna, that was more than enough.

“Tch! He’s too strong!”

“Retreat!”

The two Federation ships turned to flee, but I didn't plan on letting them scurry away. I activated the thrusters, boosting out from behind the asteroid.

"Seekers! Fox 1, Fox 1!" They launched heat-seeking missiles in a desperate bid to escape.

"Flares," I said.

"Sir!" On my orders, Elma activated the flares, decoy heat sources that would lead the missiles on a wild goose chase and leave us unscathed.

"Dammiiit!"

Meanwhile, I blasted through the Federation ships' shields with the green rays of my heavy laser cannons. Their protective plating glared red as it heated up to melting. It wouldn't save them now.

"W-we can't esca—Waaaargh?!" Try as they might, the Federation ships were just too warped and sluggish to get away. They exploded in bursts of flame.

"Well, how about we grab their black boxes and data caches and then we head home?" I said.

"Home?" Mimi said.

"Yeah, home," Elma cut in. "The police are gonna pay a good price for that stuff."

"I see," Mimi said.

"I'll take care of selling the data," I said. "I've got connections with the police."

"Connections, eh?" Elma seemed intrigued. "Just don't bring any trouble back with you."

"Ha ha ha, I'd never do that. In and out. Twenty minutes tops."

***

"What do you have to say for yourself?" Elma demanded.

“Sorry,” I said.

“Master Hiro…” Mimi sighed.

“I’m so, so sorry.”

Two hours later, I was on my knees on the Krishna’s dining room floor. Make no mistake: I executed my mission just fine. I did! It was just… while Elma and Mimi took care of maintenance and resupplying, I’d headed to the galactic police’s headquarters. Lieutenant Serena herself met with me and accepted the black boxes and caches we’d recovered. Then I got my reward. A perfect job, right?

Wrong. Apparently, our accidental involvement drafted us into the war. Somehow, delivering our report to the guild had formally enlisted the Krishna and its crew.

Not exactly the chain of events I anticipated. But Lieutenant Serena insisted we’d be a valuable asset in the war effort. Even when I told her I was just some random merc, she insisted. I tried to explain, assuring her she was flattering me way too much and I wasn’t the kind of merc she was looking for, but she made it clear I didn’t have any say in the matter.

“And that brings us to the current state of affairs,” I said.

“It sounds like she had you dancing in her palm,” Elma said.

“Master Hiro…” Mimi said.

“I can’t apologize enough.” I withered under their reproach. I bowed my head nearly to the floor, but it wouldn’t absolve me of this one.

“Well, whatever.” Elma heaved a sigh. “You’re the captain. You can accept jobs without consulting us.”

“She’s right. You are our captain,” Mimi said.

“Thank you for your forgiveness!” I said, bowing again.

“You *could* make it up to us though,” Elma said. “Nobody would blame you if, say, you gave us a bonus.”

“A bonus? But I’m already being paid far too much,” Mimi protested.

“Shh!” Elma hissed. “You gotta take what you can get when you can get it. Captain, show us how resourceful you can be.”

“I’ll think long and hard about it,” I promised.

“There you go, Mimi,” Elma said. “He’s totally on board.”

“A-are you sure…?” Mimi still seemed uncomfortable with the whole idea. Even so, I felt awful. Maybe I could find some extra-special food and alcohol at Oishii Mart to try to make amends.

“So,” Elma continued, “are we stuck on standby until something happens?”

“Pretty much,” I said. “She told me not to fight yet.”

“They’re going to pay us a waiting fee, right?”

“I negotiated all that, don’t worry. It’s 50,000 Ener per day.”

“Fifty thousand just for waiting? That’s incredible.” Mimi gaped at the sum.

Elma shrugged. “It sounds about right to me.”

Compared to the 200,000 we made by bounty hunting, 50,000 wasn’t all that much. But hey, making a nice stack of cash without putting ourselves in danger *was* pretty cushy. It was enough to entice us to accept the Empire’s request and agree to go on standby.

“She wants us to avoid drinking while we wait,” I noted.

“Nooo!” Elma wailed, but I kind of agreed. We never knew when they’d send us into battle. If we happened to be drunk when the call arrived, we’d be doomed.

“That’s 1,500 Ener per day just to abstain from alcohol, Elma,” Mimi pointed out.

“Yeah, yeah…”

“Think of it this way: each day you don’t drink lets you save up 1,500 Ener for future drinks!” Mimi tried.

“Yeah!” The poor little space elf’s long ears twitched with excitement. Saving up 150,000 yen worth of booze per day was a mighty sum if you were so inclined.

“Mimi, you’re a genius!” Elma said.

“Tee hee!”

Maybe Mimi had a talent for cheering people up? No, not maybe—she absolutely did. Being with her cheered me up every day.

***

We didn't have to wait long before the call arrived. The Belbellum Federation must have felt exposed after those recon ships I'd destroyed. They wasted little time going on the offensive. I had no idea what was in the black boxes and data caches from those ships, but hopefully it was helping the Grakkan Empire's intelligence operations.

The Empire called an urgent meeting once the call arrived. We all had to show up in person, perhaps as a means of keeping communications more private. After we arrived at the headquarters, a soldier led us to the most enormous briefing room I'd ever seen. With so few people to fill it, the chamber felt like a cavern. The few people already assembled turned in their chairs to eye us as we entered.

"Whoa, look at that."

"He's got girls. Two of them, even!"

"That's the silver rank, Elma, right? Why's she with him?"

"She blew up her ship at that pirate gig. Maybe that's how they met, huh?"

"Die, you lucky jerk. Just…explode into pieces."

Yikes, those were some intense reactions to our appearance. We hurried toward a trio of empty chairs and took our seats.

"Mimi, you sit in the middle," I said.

"Oh! Yes, sir."

Elma seemed to be in silent agreement with me. These mercs weren't trustworthy. Neither of us wanted Mimi stuck sitting right next to some ruffian. More mercenaries arrived until every seat was filled. Only then did Lieutenant Serena enter with a few of her soldiers.

"Your attention, please!" A muscular petty officer shouted the command, making every merc instantly tense.

“We will now begin the meeting regarding the Tarmein System’s defense,” Serena said. “I’m Lieutenant Serena, and this temporary mercenary corps will be under my command. I will be your superior officer. Be sure that you address me as *Lieutenant Serena*.”

“Yes, ma’am!” everyone said in unison.

“Good. Now, let’s explain the current situation. Georg?”

“Ma’am.” The petty officer, Georg, dimmed the lights and put up a giant holographic map of the Tarmein System.

“Currently, the Belbellum Federation’s ships are advancing on this system,” Lieutenant Serena said. “As they’re already in hyperdrive, we have little specific information. Based on independently obtained data and hyperspace sensors, the Imperial Fleet believes this is an attack force composed of eight battleships, twenty-four heavy cruisers, thirty-two light cruisers, sixty-four destroyers, and one hundred twenty-eight corvette warships.”

A whisper of shock rippled through the room. That was no minor incursion. With a force like that, the Federation was angling for a full-on military confrontation.

“To be frank,” Lieutenant Serena continued, “the enemy’s forces outnumber the fleets currently stationed in this system. This comes as no surprise. We’ve already called for reinforcements. As long as we can hold strong tomorrow, the reinforcements will arrive in time. That’s why our mission is specifically to hold the system for twenty-four hours starting tomorrow. That is the time we need to buy.”

Well, it looked like the black boxes and data caches really did help. No wonder they’d paid me so well for them.

“Your job as mercenaries is to hide in the asteroid belt and launch guerrilla-style strikes against any Federation ships that try to pass through. Most likely, you’ll be fighting their destroyers and corvettes. If you happen to take down a cruiser or battleship, though, you can expect quite the reward.” Lieutenant Serena smirked as the mercenaries chuckled. Taking down a cruiser or larger ship sounded great in theory, but mercenaries usually piloted small or medium craft. Lieutenant Serena could offer any

reward she wanted, but we weren't likely to take out a cruiser or battleship; we probably wouldn't even get through their shields with our weaponry.

I said *we*, but I meant *they*. They wouldn't get through. My Krishna, on the other hand, carried a secret trump card.

"Accomplish the mission by any means necessary," Lieutenant Serena said. "The ends justify *any* means necessary in this case."

Oh ho, any means? Should I announce my secret trump card? Hmm… No, I can't do that yet. I'd looked it up. It was *way* taboo in this universe. Better to leave it in my unscannable cargo areas for now.

In that case… Hmm. Can I still go for it? There's not much to lose.

"Permission to speak, Lieutenant Serena?" I asked.

"Oh, you're… Never mind. Permission granted." Lieutenant Serena granted the request but frowned at Mimi and Elma beside me. *Why, I wonder?* Oh well. Couldn't worry about it right now.

"We may have a secret plan…or, well, a *scheme* in mind. Do we have permission to carry it out individually?" I said.

"A scheme, you say? Could you elaborate?"

"Yes, ma'am. I say scheme, but it's pretty simple," I said. "When they exit hyperdrive, our ship will go in alone, destroy their flagship, and escape. A simple hit-and-run operation."

Lieutenant Serena's face went deadly still, unreadable, and the mercenaries burst into an uproar. Mimi shot me an uneasy glance, while Elma's mouth hung wide open.

"Have you lost your mind?" Elma hissed. The words *that's a suicide mission, dumbass* were written all over her face.

"I believe we can do this," I said. "And if we fail then you've got one less idiot on your hands, Lieutenant Serena."

"You've displayed impeccable skill in both the previous mission and in cleaning up stragglers for us," Lieutenant Serena said. "We certainly don't want to lose such a valuable asset because of a foolhardy plan."

"No need to worry, ma'am. We've got this."

Though I'm not exactly planning to fight fair. Lieutenant Serena held my gaze, still unconvinced. Maybe she saw through my vague promises and realized I had something up my sleeve. Still, eventually she sighed and shrugged.

"Very well," she conceded. "If that's really what you want to do, then I will look forward to the completion of your work. If you succeed, expect a large bonus."

"Thank you, ma'am." I couldn't stop the grin that spread across my face. Victory.

I heard a few mutters of "crazy" and "idiot" among the mercenaries assembled, but they didn't know about my trump card. Soon, everyone would.

***

"Stupid! Stupid, dumb, fathead! Are you crazy?!"

"Mimi, Elma's being mean."

"Elma, you're being rude. Pffbt!"

"Don't stick your tongue out at me!" Elma said. "Charging into the Federation fleet alone isn't just crazy; it's downright idiotic! I don't wanna die because of your dumb plan!" Elma narrowed her eyes at me. Her shouts echoed around the cargo hold.

She'd been raving ever since the briefing. I couldn't blame her; I'd feel the same way if someone told me we were diving into two hundred enemy ships with zero information.

"Calm down," I said. "I'm not just recklessly charging in. I've got a good plan."

"Let's hear it, then."

I pulled some duct tape out of our toolbox. "What we're actually doing is simple. We'll exit faster-than-light travel when they exit hyperspace, in order to hide among their warp-out reactions. With that, they won't notice us."

“Okay, good so far. What happens next?” Elma said.

“Once we leave FTL travel, we immediately activate emergency cooling so we can run cold. We hide among the space debris and approach their flagship.”

“Aren’t they gonna catch on? What if they decide to shoot down the debris, huh?”

“With this ship’s shields and acceleration, we can force our way in even if they happen to spot us,” I said. “Once we’re close enough, we’ll launch two reactive anti-ship torpedoes at the flagship. And once we do *that*, they’re gonna go crazy.”

“Reactive anti-ship torpedoes? You have those on this ship?!”

“Yep! I just hate to use them, since they’re ridiculously expensive.”

“Excuse me? What is a reactive, anti-ship…torpedo?” It made sense that Mimi hadn’t heard of a weapon like that.

“They’re weapons made to deal major damage to ships with big shields,” I said. “The tip of each one carries a shield-saturation device and explosives. Even the biggest, baddest battleships in the galaxy would explode after two of these bad boys.”

“That’s incredible. Why doesn’t everyone use them if they’re so strong?” Mimi said.

“They’re expensive,” Elma said. “Just one of them costs 500,000 Ener on a *good* day. You’re wasting your money unless you’re up against something huge. I can’t believe any mercenary owns even a single one.”

“Five hundred thousand Ener…” Mimi blinked in disbelief.

“Anyway, I get the plan so far,” Elma said. “I feel like it’s too big of a gamble, but that’s mercenary life, I guess. If you think it’s doable, I suppose I believe you. But how do we get back *out* after all that?”

“Once the flagship explodes, the Federation’s leadership will be shaken,” I said. “The Krishna is going to be surrounded. If we try to escape when the time isn’t right, they’ll just shoot us down.”

“So you do know it’s suicide.” In normal circumstances, she’d be right. Even the Krishna would be left defenseless when surrounded on all

sides like that. Even if the enemy used weaker weapons for fear of friendly fire, we wouldn't last long.

Except.

"That's why we're putting *this* baby on one of the torpedoes." I threw back a tarp concealing the greatest of all my contraband: the Singing Crystal. Pale light radiated from within its glass container, its song still faintly audible. Destroying this thing would summon a horde of crystal life-forms. Nobody knew why, but the whys didn't matter right now. All that mattered was that we had the power to unleash a cascade of space beasts on the enemy fleet.

"Mgh?! Wh-what is that?!" Elma said, reeling away from the container.

"It's a Singing Crystal," I said.

"Dumbass! How much dangerous stuff do you have hidden around here?! D-don't you dare drop that, okay?! Do *NOT* drop that!"

"Whoopsie!" I pretended to fumble the container.

"Eep?!" Elma flinched back in horror.

"It's that lovely crystal from before!" Mimi said. "Does it…make noise?"

"Mimi, no! Don't listen to it! It'll make you go crazy and die!" Elma covered her long ears and backed away.

"Huh?! Really?!" Mimi edged away as well.

"It just makes you kind of homesick, that's all," I said. "Heh, but maybe that is kinda poisonous for us."

I had no way of going home, Mimi had no home left at all, and…I didn't exactly know what Elma's deal was, but she struck me as some rich girl who'd run away from her family and had no desire to ever go back. Not a group of people who could risk getting homesick.

I carried the crystal to the ammunition storage area. Cramped within that tight space, we'd find the torpedoes.

"Spinny, spinny, wrap, wrap." I duct-taped the Singing Crystal to one of the reactive anti-ship torpedoes. "That oughta do it."

“What?! That won’t do it at all!” Elma was waiting for me when I crawled out of ammunition storage. She smacked me right on the head. *Ow!*

Mimi, our resident angel, soothed away the pain. “Elma, don’t be violent.”

“Don’t boss me around!” Elma said. “You might not know, but that crystal is serious contraband! If it falls or even *bumps into* something, it could break and bring tons of crystal life-forms this way. It’s as dangerous as it gets out here.”

“Is that true, Master Hiro?” Mimi asked.

“More or less.”

“Stop sounding so indifferent!” Elma said. “You’ve been storing all this dangerous stuff without telling us, and you won’t so much as apologize!”

“Okay, okay, yeah, sorry. Calm down. I’m getting a headache from all this yelling.” I raised my hands in surrender. “Anyway, that’s our trump card. Our hidden weapon, you could say. Throw that into the middle of the Federation fleet, summon the crystal life-forms, and escape in the midst of the confusion. That’s my plan.”

“That would confuse them, I guess…but it’s way too dangerous,” Elma said.

“Dangerous” was one word for it, yes. “Insane” was another. Crystal life-forms were no joke. They’d go on killing until they killed each other. The crystal was essentially a biological weapon—the monsters it summoned could cause serious damage.

“But if we win, who cares?!” I said. Even if there was collateral damage, we’d still make it out of there. The moment we could, we’d escape. Even besides the crystal life-forms that could assimilate other life-forms into themselves, the enemy commanded more than sixty large craft with wide bore laser cannons and reactive warheads that could wipe out the whole asteroid belt. Not sticking around for that.

“You’re weirdly brazen today, but I guess you’re right,” Elma said.

“Let’s forget about all that for now. What matters is this moment.” I faced my crewmates. “This plan is extremely dangerous. If we mess up,

we're dead. So if you'd like, you can leave—"

"We're not leaving," Elma interrupted. "We already agreed to roll with the danger of being part of this crew. Besides, Mimi and I kinda owe you our lives."

"There's nowhere for us to go if we leave," Mimi added. "Master Hiro, we'll go wherever you go."

"I wouldn't go that far," Elma said. "But it does look like we have a real chance of winning, so count me in."

"All right. Guess that settles it." Maybe I was worrying for nothing. The plan *was* extremely dangerous—one slip up and we were dead—but it should work. Still, the thought of failing them and causing all our deaths terrified me to my very core.

"Anyway, forget all that," Elma said.

"Hm?" I raised an eyebrow. What was with the sudden change?

"Don't you think it's a *little* unfair that you were hiding a Singing Crystal from us, knowing that it was dangerous?" Elma said.

"Ngh…" What could I say? She was absolutely right. I was trying to keep them from worrying, but it was cruel to leave them in the dark. They deserved to know just how much risk they were bearing on my behalf. "I'm sorry."

"I'm glad you understand," Elma said. "Next time you have illegal contraband on board, I want you to tell us. Got it?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Tee hee!" Mimi giggled at our exchange. "Elma, you sound like his big sister."

"Naturally," Elma said. "I'm the older, more experienced veteran, after all."

"A veteran who doesn't know her own ship, LOL," I said.

"LOL?"

Oops. Probably not a phrase they had here. "Nothing, I'm sorry, please forgive me," I said. I bowed, hoping it was enough. I might be good

with a gun, but Elma would whoop my butt in hand-to-hand combat. “So, shall we get going?”

“Yes, sir!” Mimi said.

“Sounds good to me,” Elma said.

***

With the preparations complete, we all strapped in and prepared our stations. I sat in the pilot’s seat with Elma copiloting, while Mimi sat behind us in the operator’s position. Our gravity spheres hovered nearby, keeping us hydrated as we readied to embark.

“I know we’re about to fight for our lives, but it feels kind of anti-climactic. I’m not even nervous,” Elma said.

“No point in being overly tense, right?” I said with a shrug.

“As long as we have Master Hiro, I’m at ease,” Mimi said.

“Unshakeable as ever, aren’t you?” Elma said.

“Of course. I trust Master Hiro,” Mimi said.

“You sure are expecting a lot of me,” I said. “I’ll try to meet those expectations.”

“Sir! Oh, Master Hiro, we’re receiving a message,” Mimi said. “It’s from the Imperial Fleet’s heavy cruiser, Glorious. Should I pick up?”

“From the Imperial Fleet? Yeah, pick up.” Drat. Foiled! I’d been going for my gravity sphere full of delicious but non-carbonated soda when Mimi interrupted with the call.

Lieutenant Serena appeared on the screen, prim and professional—at least until she noticed our gravity spheres and her mouth fell open.

“Well, you’re quite composed for someone on a suicide mission,” she said.

“That’s because I know we’re gonna live through it,” I said.

Get as close as possible via faster-than-light travel, shoot the shot, get out. If all went to plan, it would be simple and clean, with plenty of time left over for me to enjoy my soda.

"I'd begun to worry the nerves would get to you," Serena said. "Hopefully you have the bite to back up that bark."

"Of course!" I said. "I'm a professional, after all."

Lieutenant Serena just smiled to herself and shook her head before cutting off communications. So much for the pep talk I guess.

"That lady must be bored," I said. "Who would open up communications just because she was worried about one merc?"

"I wonder what she's really after," Elma said.

"Dunno. Not that it's worth worrying about. Mimi, cut and disable all communication lines."

"Yes, sir. Disabling now."

"Elma, bring engines to max. We're entering FTL drive."

"Aye-aye, Captain. Engines at maximum."

"Begin charging FTL drive," I said.

"Charging now. Five, four, three, two, one… Faster-than-light drive charged," Elma said.

With a supersonic boom, the Krishna warped into faster-than-light travel. Stars melted outside our windows, running in streaks like smudges on the glass.

"Keep an eye on the radar," I said. "Don't miss the Federation ships leaving hyperspace."

"Understood," both Mimi and Elma said.

When it came to hyperdrive, you could think of it like an intergalactic highway, with ships traveling in "lanes" just like a road. Of course, hyperlanes were massive compared to earth roads, which meant there was some variance in where exactly you'd land when taking a hyperlane. Still, thanks to these lanes we had a general idea of where the Federation fleet would show up when they left hyperdrive.

As for us, we loitered around the exit of their lane for a good ten minutes, waiting for the Federation to finally show up.

“Radar detecting several warp-out reactions,” Elma said.

“Nice. Let’s slow down.” I swung the ship toward the Federation fleet’s entry point and exited FTL travel. “Initiate emergency cooling and cut generator output.”

“Emergency cooling initiated. Generator output reduced.”

As we exited FTL, we also reduced the Krishna’s generator output to minimum and activated the emergency cooling system, plunging us into darkness as we ran cold to evade sensors.

“Awesome! Everything’s going to plan so far. Let’s sneak on in,” I said.

“This is a really clever idea,” Elma said. “How’d you come up with it?”

“Not sure,” I said. “Sometimes it takes a little creativity to survive. Otherwise, you’re dead.”

“That’s our Master Hiro.” Mimi beamed with pride.

I turned off flight assist mode, using only inertia to approach the Federation fleet. More of their ships exited hyperdrive as we drifted toward them.

“What a sight,” I said. “This is so cool.” Even after all I’d been through in this universe, I couldn’t help being awed by the splendor of space.

“You’ve got that right,” Elma said. “It’s kind of surreal to see that many ships all lined up nice and neat.”

“Yeah,” I said. “This really is something.”

Battleships, heavy cruisers, light cruisers, destroyers, and corvettes arrayed in perfect formation, an awe-inspiring sight indeed. Sadly, we hadn’t done all this just to admire their tidy military formations. It was time to work.

“That’s the flagship,” I said. It sat right at the heart of their formation, massive and well protected as it issued commands.

“We’re really gonna dive in there?” Elma asked. Her face drained of color.

“Yup, sure are.” It was far too late to get cold feet and run.

“There are no more warp-out signals,” Mimi said. “The Federation fleet has begun moving.”

“All right,” I said. “It’s almost time to do this. We’re sitting at a good striking distance. Activate emergency cooling again and put generator output to maximum.”

“Ugh, jeez,” Elma said, but she launched into action at my command. “Emergency cooling reactivated. Generator output maximum!”

“Chaaarge!”

Within seconds of beginning our reckless dive, Federation ships took notice. Our hull crackled, actually freezing over in places thanks to all that rapid cooling, but I threw the thrusters to maximum and rushed for the battleship at the center of the fleet.

“Hey, check the radar!” a Federation pilot said. “Bandit rapidly approaching! They’re just above us and they’re *close*!”

“What?! The radar observer better get his head out of his ass!” another enemy barked.

“Their ship is extremely cold! And they’ve been hiding in the debris!” a third added.

“Ha ha ha!” I laughed. “Look at them panicking.” The Federation fighters swung their cannons toward me as I slipped through their ranks, but there was no way they’d fire now. The risk of hitting each other instead of me was too high. “Hah! Say hello to my little friends!”

Swooping toward the big command ship at the center, I fired my reactive anti-ship torpedoes. Even as I pulled up, swinging away, an explosion rocked the battleship, snapping it clean in half.

“Battleship Tiger Eye is down! This guy’s got reactive anti-ship torpedoes!”

“Dammit! A mercenary?! We’re allowing friendly fire. Use your multi-cannon turrets! Don’t use lasers, anti-air cannons, or seeker missiles!

Get him!”

“Yeehaw! Giant-killing complete!” I whooped.

“H-Hey, now’s not the time for yeehaws!” Elma said. “We need to run!”

“You don’t have to tell me twice!”

Even as we veered away, the ping of weapons locking on to us echoed through the cockpit. Having lost their flagship, the enemy was out for blood.

“Hold on! Where are the crystal life-forms?!” Elma yelled.

“It takes about thirty seconds for them to appear,” I said.

“Huh?! Thirty seconds? Are we gonna last that long?!”

“We just gotta keep moving,” I said. “They can’t use strong weapons while we’re in the middle of their fleet. We’ll be okay.”

“We will not even *remotely* be okay, you stupid oaf!”

Bullets pattered against the hull like hail as Elma shouted at me. Multi cannon fire—and it was coming from every direction.

“Deploy chaff and activate emergency cooling,” I said.

“Already done!”

“Mimi, reactivate communications! Send all data to the Imperial Fleet!”

“Yes, sir!”

We bobbed and ducked and wove between their bullets, narrowly escaping the brunt of their firepower. Shields were mostly meant for bumping back space debris, but they repelled the bullets now, keeping us safe from the worst of it.

Well, at least until…

“Our shields are weakening!” Elma said.

“Use shield cells when necessary! Spare no expense!” I said.

“Understood!”

Communications from the Federation fleet crackled over our comms.

“Those are tough shields for a small ship.”

“He knows the angle limits of our cannons. Cover each other’s blind spots!”

“He’s holding fast… What?!” I sent a spray of flak at the bottom of a heavy cruiser we’d been hiding behind. The ammo ate right through the shields and sheared the ship open.

“Two down!” I counted. “Oh, here they are!”

A shrill cry pierced the empty darkness of space, striking me right to my core, reverberating inside me. Tears opened in the fabric of space an instant before beings of pure nightmare spilled out.

“The crystal life-forms,” I said. “It’s time to get out of here.”

“Whoa, there are so many!” Mimi seemed equal parts awed and terrified.

“Aargh, jeez! This is just chaos!” Elma said.

The foul fissures in space spewed out creatures that looked like missiles or perhaps tusks. They were jagged, with sharp, tapered claws and fangs that they used to stab ships full of holes. Some even fired off pieces of themselves or used energy beams to blast through the Federation ships.

“Warp-out signals detected! Are those…crystal life-forms?!” a Federation pilot cried.

“Why the hell are those here?!” another said.

“They’re coming! Gaaaaah!”

“Fight back! Fight, now! Use everything you’ve got!”

“Dumbass, I’m on your side—aaaaagh!”

“Eeeep?! M-my legs are corroding… Noooooo!”

Chaos reigned. The Federation could barely coordinate their defense, let alone chase after me.

“This is awful,” I said, watching the terror I’d unleashed.

“You’re the one who did it!” Elma growled. Mimi just listened to the enemies’ dying cries, pale-faced and quivering in horror.

“Mimi, if you don’t want to hear this, cover your ears,” I said.

“I-I’m okay.” She didn’t seem entirely okay, but I wasn’t going to force it.

“All right,” I said. “Time to earn our keep.”

“Huh…?” Elma went somehow even more pale.

“Look. The Federation fleet is in chaos,” I said.

“Y-yes? And?” she said.

“*And* this is the ideal time to take them out,” I said.

“Are you kidding?”

“Absolutely not.” I wheeled us around, diving back toward the flailing Federation fleet. “Here goes!” In my head, I was definitely hearing some badass final boss music.

“Gaaah, no! No, we’re gonna die, idiot! How stupid are you?!” Elma said.

“Elma.”

“What?!”

“Long ago, a man in red once said, ‘It doesn’t matter how powerful you are if you can’t hit me.’”

“Was he also the biggest dumbass in the galaxy?!”

Ouch. He wasn’t the “biggest dumbass in the galaxy,” as Elma said, and neither was I. We had shields. We had weapons. We could do this.

With the enemy busy fending off crystals, I was free to attack. I launched my two remaining reactive anti-ship torpedoes. Easy game, easy life.

“They’re grazing us!” Elma said. “Are you listening?! Aaah, crystal life-forms to starboard! Large-bore lasers to the port bow!”

“Whoops. Easy,” I said.

“You’re quite calm, Master Hiro,” Mimi said.

“People who panic in battle are usually the first to die. You try to keep calm, too, Mimi,” I said.

“Yes, sir.”

“I heard that!” Elma protested.

A couple of the crystal life-forms tried to get in my way as I advanced, but I easily broke through them. Flak blasted through crystal pretty easily, leaving me free to pursue my prey: the Federation’s large craft. It only took a few heavy laser and flak shots to bring them down after all the damage they’d sustained from the crystal life-forms. They made a feeble attempt to reform their lines and resist the crystals, but that just left them vulnerable to me instead.

They were…less than pleased.

“That ship with the arms!”

“Kill him already! Destroy him!”

“Four-armed devil!”

Sorry, guys. All’s fair in love and war. Ship after Federation ship fell to my fire. It really was like shooting fish in a barrel now. *Yeah, I’ll be bringing home the bacon tonight!*

“Th-the Imperial Fleet is coming this way!”

“Dammit, now?! They couldn’t come at a worse time! Did they send the crystals and this armed bastard?!”

Looked like that would be the end of the easy scores for me. Time to beat a strategic retreat.

“That’ll do it,” I said. “Let’s get out of this sector.”

“Now?!” Elma said.

“Yeah. We don’t wanna get stuck in the crossfire.” The Imperial Fleet would unload once they saw both the crystal life-forms and the Federation before them. I didn’t want to be in the middle of that for even a second. “Prep the shield cells. Deploy chaffs and flares, too.”

“Deployed!” Elma said.

“We’re gonna jet. Don’t bite your tongues!” I slammed the thrusters to max and readied for an emergency escape.

“That merc ship’s escaping! Shoot, shoot!”

“Don’t let him get away!”

“Begin charging FTL drive,” I said.

“Charging now. Five, four, three…” Elma counted down.

“The target’s charging his FTL drive!”

“Damn you! You’ll regret this, buddy!”

“Sorry, no time for regrets. Later!” One final parting shot for the enemy.

“Two, one… Activating FTL drive,” Elma said.

Boom! Thunder clapped as we shot out of the sector, leaving behind neither light nor sound for them to pursue. Normally, they could try to follow our wake, but they were a bit preoccupied.

“I thought we were dead…” Elma sighed, slumping down in her chair.

“Ha ha ha, don’t be silly,” I said.

“I don’t think she was being silly,” Mimi said. “Still, Master Hiro, that was incredible!” Mimi watched me with stars in her eyes. I had to admit, it felt dang good. I wasn’t inclined to stop her.

“So.” Elma gathered herself. “How much did we make?”

“I couldn’t even keep track of how many ships we downed. Mimi, did you?” I said.

“Yes, sir. Hmm… Three battleships, four heavy cruisers, two light cruisers, thirteen destroyers, and twenty-one corvettes.”

“That’s a big catch!” I said. “I think it was 2,000,000 per battleship, 500,000 per heavy cruiser, 300,000 per light cruiser, 100,000 per destroyer, and 50,000 per corvette. Our total is…10,950,000 Ener. We’re rolling in it, girls!”

“Ten million, nine hundred fifty thousand…” Mimi repeated in a daze.

“Those four torpedoes cost you 2,000,000 total, right? So your actual profit is more like 8,950,000. My cut is 3 percent, so…268,500 Ener, huh?” Elma said.

“And Mimi’s cut is 44,750 Ener,” I said.

“Forty-four thousand, seven hundred fifty…” Mimi struggled to pronounce the whole sum. I needed to subtract their cuts from my haul, which put me at 8,636,750 Ener. I had 2,000,000 in savings already. Plus, the black boxes and data caches from before, which had sold for about 500,000. Adding all this up, I had…roughly 11,130,000 Ener. *I’m loaded!*

“I have 11,000,000 Ener in savings now,” I said. “Yet it’s still not enough…”

“Not enough? What are you trying to do, buy a new ship?” Elma said.

“I’d like to go to a safe planet and build a detached house with a yard,” I said.

“Oooh, yeah,” Elma said. “Not even close to enough.”

Well, shoot. I’d figured as much, but hey, I could have been wrong. It made sense though. Between buying landowner’s rights and purchasing the land itself, I probably needed *hundreds* of millions of Ener. Eleven million was a drop in the bucket.

“With your skill, maybe you’d be better off working for the Imperial Fleet and being a knight or something,” Elma said.

I shrugged. As I understood it, the Grakkan Empire had what basically amounted to a feudal system. Nobles governed each sector, guarding their bloodlines and preventing commoners from rising in the ranks—except through knighthood. Even a commoner could become a knight by proving themselves in the Imperial Fleet—and knights could receive landowner rights and act like nobility.

Still, that kind of life held no appeal for me. With the titles of a noble came the duties of a noble.

“Being a soldier or royalty or whatever sounds annoying, so I’ll pass,” I said. “If I can throw money at the problem, that’s the way I’d like to do it.”

“That sounds like you. Honestly, I agree, it sounds annoying.” Elma smiled and shrugged.

Mimi…hadn't quite recovered still. She kept muttering "Ener" to herself as she stared off into space, focused on nothing. It was probably best to leave her be.

"Anyway, what do we do now?" I asked. "It feels a little weird to rejoin the battle at this point."

"Why not?" Elma said. "If we keep going rogue the other mercs aren't gonna like us. We'd be better off hanging with them to show we're part of the team."

"Fair enough. Let's do it." I pointed us back toward the battle. We burst out of FTL travel right above Lieutenant Serena's battleship. "Krishna here. We've finished our duty and returned intact."

Lieutenant Serena responded quickly. "A job well done, Krishna. It seems you've made quite the profit."

"Yeah, you could say that," I said. "We did shoulder a hefty amount of risk, after all, so it's not like we didn't earn it."

"You are correct," Serena said. "Provide us with your data, if you please. Do you plan to join us in this rout?"

"I'd rather not. If I come away with an even bigger payday the other mercs might start giving me the side-eye. Plus, we're hurting for ammo, chaffs, flares, and shield cells after all that."

"Very well. Then you're free to guard one of the bombardment units near the main fleet. Incidentally…I have to wonder why those crystal life-forms appeared in a place like this."

"I guess their flagship had some dangerous cargo on-board when I destroyed it." I didn't really expect her to buy my excuse, but I had to give her something. Besides, she didn't *really* have a good way of proving me wrong.

"Well, I suppose we can leave it at that. Lieutenant Serena out." The communications channel closed with a click.

"Welp. I guess we just wait until the fight is over, huh?" I said.

"Thanks to your disruption, it looks like this is gonna be a one-sided battle," Elma said.

“Not a bad day’s work, if I do say so myself.”

“I’d like to tell you not to get too cocky…but I guess you deserve it, huh?” Elma said. “I think you did a great job, even if I thought we were about to die that whole time.”

“That’s our Master Hiro.” Mimi puffed out her ample chest in pride. Looked like she’d recovered from her shock at last. Good. Maybe we could “calm down” from the battle together a little later.

***

The defense of the Tarmein System ended in a blink. Though the Grakkan Empire anticipated a hard-fought battle, victory arrived rather easily. According to the official records, crystal life-forms descended on the Belbellum Federation’s fleet the moment they left hyperdrive, immediately unleashing chaos and destruction. The casualties were overwhelming: 90 percent of their ships destroyed and very few surviving soldiers. The rout was so complete that the Federation instituted a media blackout to prevent further shame.

The Grakkan Empire knew little more than the Federation about the appearance of the crystal life-forms. In the aftermath, speculation about how and why the crystals had appeared ran rampant. On top of the strangeness of the mere presence of the life-forms, many wondered how they’d done so much damage to a Federation fleet that should have been capable of avoiding such abject failure. Quickly, one theory pointed at a certain mercenary and a certain Imperial commander: Captain Hiro and Lieutenant Serena. Somehow, their combined presence had delivered a miraculous victory for the Grakkan Empire.

Of course, nothing was known for sure. What they did know for certain was that both Captain Hiro and Lieutenant Serena Holz went on to many, many more military victories.

***

“Again?”

“Seriously?”

Elma and Mimi shot me looks of pure exasperation at the message that popped up on my terminal. I agreed with the sentiment completely. “The Grakkan Imperial Fleet is always looking for spectacular pilots like you!” the message from Lieutenant Serena read. “You’ll get the red-carpet treatment, substantial benefits, landowner rights, and much, much more! I want YOU for the Grakkan Imperial Fleet!”

I was getting something along these lines pretty much every day. Did this count as spam?

“Jeez, what the heck?” I said incredulously. “That woman’s gonna be personally knocking on our door soon enough.”

“She looks like a hunter pursuing her prey,” Elma said.

“I certainly don’t like it.” I appreciated pretty girls wanting me, but when it was for military service, I had to give a hard no. Red-carpet treatment or not, it didn’t pay as well as mercenary work. I would lose my free time, too. Heck, for all I knew, I might lose my Krishna at some point in the process.

And anyway, as nice as the perks sounded, I could buy most of them, including landowner rights, simply by continuing to work as a mercenary. All I really needed was cash and that was simple enough to come by without enlisting in the military.

“Okay, let’s run,” I said.

“Run? Are you sure?” Mimi said.

“They won’t care,” Elma said. “We mercs can go where we want. Running away before it turns into a big deal is our best course. We’ve finished maintenance and replenished everything but the reactive anti-ship torpedoes, so we can leave any time.”

“Ah, forget the torpedoes. I’m not using ’em that often. Let’s just get out of here.”

When a weapon cost 500,000 Ener, you didn’t just whip it out whenever anything happened. Besides, not many places even stocked the things, unlike in *Stella Online* where they were easy to purchase.

“Sh-should we really be doing this?” Mimi fidgeted and fretted. I understood her worry, but leaving the Tarmein System wouldn’t automatically put us on a wanted list or anything. Lieutenant Serena had too many responsibilities to go chasing after the likes of us.

“What’s our next destination?” Elma asked.

“It’s a little far, about six systems away,” I said.

“Six… So it’s that place we were discussing yesterday?” Elma said.

“Yep. That’s where all the Empire’s latest medical tech is,” I said.

“The Arein System, right?”

“That’s the one.” Tons of medical stations and biotechnology existed in the Arein System. “Looks like they’re known for genetically-modified crops and a wide variety of artificial meat.”

“How about their booze?” Elma said.

“If they’ve got genetically-modified crops, I imagine they can use them to make alcohol.”

“That sounds lovely,” Mimi chimed in. “I look forward to new culinary experiences!”

I took the helm, with Mimi in the operator’s seat and Elma as copilot. We all strapped on our seatbelts.

“Mimi, can you send a departure request?” I asked.

“Yes, sir!”

“Elma, you control power output and subsystems as usual.”

“Yeah, yeah. Gotcha.”

“They’ve accepted our request,” Mimi said.

“Nice. Off we go!” I detached our docking gear from the hangar bay, lifted the landing gear, and launched us into space.

Immediately, the vastness of space swallowed us up, leaving me feeling small and insignificant in the scheme of things. That excited me more than it deterred me, though. We were free to fling ourselves off to the farthest stars we saw.

“How about we start with the Delluma System?” I said.

“Very well. I’ll set the route.” Mimi operated her console, booting up the navigation. I followed the blips that would lead us to our first pit stop along our journey.

“I’ll begin charging the faster-than-light drive now,” Elma said.

“All right. Countdown, please.”

“Five, four, three, two, one… Activating FTL drive.” A familiar boom preceded the Krishna’s dive into faster-than-light travel.

“Destination: Delluma System. Begin charging hyperdrive,” I said.

“Hyperdrive charging,” Elma said.

“Successfully connected to hyperlane,” I said.

“Counting down. Five, four, three, two, one. Activating hyperdrive.”

Space warped around us as we entered the hyperlane. It was time to set off for the ends of the universe—not the game’s universe. The real universe.

***

“Yeah, those are some real accomplishments. Are you *sure* about this, though, Serena?” My uncle frowned from the other side of the screen.

I smiled. “Yes,” I said. “I’ve been insisting on a roaming, pirate-hunting force for some time, haven’t I? Hopefully, they’ll live up to that.”

“With your ability, you could have transferred to a more promising unit. I know you won’t listen to me, though. Settle this as you please.”

“Thank you very much.”

“Well, that’s that. Goodbye.”

We bowed to each other and cut communications. The hologram window blinked out.

“I won’t let you go that easily.”

I spoke to myself, watching through the window as a certain ship dashed off into space, trailing light warping in its wake.

Extra 1:
Mimi and Elma

EVEN WITH FASTER-THAN-LIGHT travel on our side, we faced days of travel along hyperlanes to reach the Arein System. We took shifts keeping an eye on the monitors and radar while the ship cruised along on autopilot.

"Good job, Mimi," Elma said. "Want me to make some tea for you?"

"Thank you. Black tea would be nice." I nodded, grateful for a break from my shift in the cockpit. I joined Elma in the cafeteria, dropping into one of the seats around the table.

"Here you go," Elma said. "I put sugar in for you, too."

"Thank you. Mm, it's very good." The Steel Chef 5 cooked everything for us—even tea. It was incredible that it could handle both tea and meat with the same precision, but I had to confess, everything that came out of the cooker was delicious, dangerously delicious. If I didn't watch it I'd overindulge pretty soon.

"Sooo. Today's your ride, right?" Elma smirked.

"Huh?!" Try as I might to play it off, heat lit my face.

"Ha ha! You're still so innocent, Mimi. It's cute."

"Goodness. Don't tease me, please."

My ride meant, um, that I was going to Master Hiro's room tonight. Which meant that we were doing…stuff.

"Really, though," Elma said. "How are things going between you two? Think it'll work out?"

"Mm… Yes. Master Hiro is very sweet, and he gave me this job. I've never felt so fulfilled before in my life." I sipped my tea to ease my embarrassment. Still, it was the truth. I was happy working as an operator, helping Elma and Master Hiro as much as I could. It felt good to be an essential part of the team.

“Yeah, he’s a good guy,” Elma said. “I gotta wonder why he chose the merc life, though.”

“Hmm… Maybe he comes from a distinguished family?” I said.

“It feels that way, right? He lacks sense in a way that makes me feel like he hasn’t seen much of the universe.”

“I can agree with that. He seems confused by many things that anyone would know.”

“That guy might think he can fool us, but he’s totally wrong.” Elma giggled with mischief. Somehow, a simple food printer like the Steel Chef completely awed Master Hiro, yet operating a terminal or a whole ship seemed as natural for him as breathing.

“How does someone that naive get by?” Elma said.

“Umm, that’s going a little far…” I tried to protest but found myself grinning instead. Elma was right on the money. Master Hiro *was* naive. He got excited over every little piece of tech or glimpse of the universe, like some kid who’d been raised entirely inside and never experienced the world.

“It’s bad manners to probe into a merc’s past, so I’m not gonna bug him over it,” Elma said. “Even if he’s a little awkward sometimes.”

“I understand that sentiment.” Master Hiro’s curiosity could certainly get him in trouble, but it was endearing and infectious as well.

“It’s kinda cute though, isn’t it? I wonder why.”

“Tee hee. It sounds to me like you’re in love, Elma.”

Elma’s face went bright red, ears twitching. Oops! But it was only fair for the way she teased me.

“I-I’m not… Cut it out!” Elma said.

“That’s what you get for teasing me.” I tried to hide my laughter behind my hand, but it spilled out.

To be honest, I never thought I’d laugh again after my parents passed away. Master Hiro gave me a second chance at a happy life.

I prayed that this time, the happiness would last.

Extra 2:
Shooting Practice

"TODAY, we're off to the shooting range," I declared during breakfast. Only a few days had passed since that rout of the Belbellum fleet. I was still hiding from Lieutenant Serena's aggressive recruitment campaign. Mimi and Elma dropped their utensils at the announcement, blinking at me in surprise.

"This is rather sudden, but I'm all for it! I do need more practice," Mimi said.

"I don't mind either, but…this is really out of nowhere." Elma cocked her head quizzically.

"This recruitment thing has been stressing me out," I said. "It'd be nice to fire off some shots and get it all out."

"That's some destructive stress relief," Elma said. "I guess it's safer than blowing up asteroids, though."

"I'd never ruin the environment like that! Imagine how pissed the miners would be." Destroying asteroids brimming with raw materials would not play well with private diggers—or the mercenary guild. If I went around blowing them up for no reason I could face reprimand from the guild.

"Then are we heading to the guild after we eat?" Mimi smiled up at me. She ate a sandwich, potage, potato salad, and scrambled eggs this morning.

When I first took Mimi under my wing, she'd had trouble eating normal-sized helpings. Now she was such a hearty eater that even all that couldn't sate her. Extreme poverty may once have shrunk her stomach, but now that her appetite had returned it had returned in force. I knew she fretted about her figure, but she looked incredible to me…thanks, perhaps in small part, to my little tweaks to her AI trainer's routine and recommendations. *Heh heh heh.*

"Yup, we'll head over after breakfast," I said. "Let's try to get going pretty soon."

With that, I laid into my breakfast of a meat and cheese sandwich with vegetables and sauce. Training was hungry work.

***

Bellies warm and full, we made for the mercenary guild. I carried only my terminal and laser gun, as I'd heard we could buy energy packs at the range itself. Mimi and Elma followed me down the ramp leading out of the Krishna, Mimi with a bag over her shoulder and Elma wearing a fanny pack.

"What's your deal?" Elma demanded when she saw my expression.

"Nothing, sorry," I said. "I was just thinking about how you girls always have bags with you, unlike me." All I had on hand was the laser gun in my hip holster and the handheld terminal and backup energy packs that fit in my jacket pockets.

"Unlike men, we girls have a few additional needs," Elma said.

"Fair enough." I didn't have the slightest idea what was in those bags, but the girls knew what they needed. It wasn't that I wasn't *curious*, but it would be rude to pry. "Well, shall we?"

We used the direct elevator to head to the Third Division together. The sight of endless space whirling by just outside the elevator did not overwhelm me the way it once had. *Human adaptability is an amazing thing.* A few mercenaries cast us a curious gaze when we stepped into the guild headquarters, but most looked away after only a moment, used to our presence by now.

"Good morning. What brings you here today? Are you perhaps in search of requests?" The scary receptionist woman greeted us with a beaming smile. I thought I caught a glimpse of her coworker somewhere behind her, biting on a handkerchief and weeping, but it was better not to make eye contact.

"Nope," I said. "We're just here for some shooting practice today."

"Very well," she said. "The range is just over there. You can purchase energy packs from the vending machine. Please take the utmost care to

avoid any accidents, as the guild claims no responsibility for any injuries that may occur in the shooting range."

"Understood." After a quick bow, we headed over. This was the same facility we'd used back when I taught Mimi self-defense.

"You're weirdly polite to that receptionist," Elma sneered. "Do you have a crush on her?"

"Not at all." I shook my head. "I'm just polite because she terrifies me. She threw that big guy in the back with one hand."

"That was certainly incredible," Mimi chimed in. "I wonder how she does it?"

"Huh, okay." Elma thought for a moment. "Maybe she's been genetically modified or she's a souped-up cyborg."

"Eww, that's even scarier," I said. "Do people do that to themselves?"

"Mercenaries don't, since we fight mainly on ships. People who guard big shots, fight hand-to-hand, or investigate new planets often do it, though."

"Wow. Are those real jobs?" *Stella Online* didn't have those missions, but, as I'd learned, much that came from the game did not make it to this universe. And vice versa.

Mimi was first up at the firing range, practicing with her laser while Elma supervised. In the meantime, I surreptitiously attempted to figure out how my own weird sci-fi weaponry worked.

"This is how you handle it," Elma said. "Understood?"

"Yes, Elma," Mimi said.

"Thanks, Elma. I'll watch her actual shooting practice once you're done," I said.

"Really? Okay, then I'll do my own practice." I stepped in for Elma, using one of the wider shooting lanes designed for instruction. I gave Mimi pointers on how to improve her form, grip, and overall technique, but to be honest, most of my knowledge came from observation and imitation.

"Don't close either eye when you aim," I directed. "You want both eyes open."

“B-both eyes?”

“Yeah. It’ll be hard to get used to, but you can’t close an eye. That makes your vision narrow and reduces your accuracy. See, you don’t just focus on the target and shoot blindly. You gotta let your gun do the focusing. Line it up through the sights and then find the target from there.”

After a couple of initial stumbles, Mimi hit her target.

“I-I hit it!” she exclaimed.

“Yep, you’re doing well. Let’s add some targets.” I operated our lane’s console to add four targets at varying distances. “The targets light up in order. Shoot whichever one is lit up. But take it easy; you won’t get punished for missing or anything so there’s no reason not to take your time.”

“Okay!” Mimi’s breathing went quick and shallow with excitement. *Good!* If she enjoyed practice she’d probably get more out of it.

She started strong, but once her accuracy started to dip I called for a break.

“It makes your arms tired, right?” I said. “Holding them out and keeping them tense for so long takes a lot out of you.”

“Yeah. My arms do feel weak…” Mimi massaged her biceps to ease the tension. Back home, I’d played around with airsoft guns a bit, so I knew how stiff and tight your shoulders could get from practicing for too long.

“Rest a while, Mimi. I’ll do some practice myself.”

“Okay.”

I worked the console to set up my own targets. I started with one close-up stationary target, then a few faraway targets like Mimi’s. A couple of them moved, dipping in and out of sight. Each round, I ramped up the difficulty.

“Haah…” I focused and took a deep breath. The world seemed to slow down around me, as though time itself stretched out.

Pew pew pew! I fired repeatedly, blowing through the targets. Why I could do this despite never using a real gun back on Earth still baffled me, but I had to use whatever I had to survive in this universe, so I wasn’t

inclined to question it. One energy pack depleted, I called it a day. I could hold my own, at least.

"You're incredible, Master Hiro!" Mimi said.

"Huh?!" I startled. I'd completely forgotten she was there, too deep in concentration. "W-was it that impressive?"

"Yes, it was incredible! Seeing you shooting down targets with such speed and accuracy was…incredible!" In her excitement, she just kept repeating that word: *Incredible*.

Mimi might have been exaggerating, but Elma leaned over from her lane and said, "I was watching from my lane, and yeah, your skills are kinda godly. I guess you'd expect that from a *champion* though, wouldn't you?"

"Heh, uh, well…I think I did okay, yeah."

This was actually only my second time ever firing this gun—the first being when I saved Mimi—but they didn't need to know that.

Taking my evasive response for humility, Elma smirked. "Aww. Are you bad at taking compliments?"

"You know, maybe you're right." Living in Japan, I never really got compliments. If people knew I was a world-class gamer, they'd probably cringe, not be impressed.

"What's with the funny face?" she asked.

"Sorry. I was just thinking that nobody's ever complimented me like this."

"Oh, true. Your whole past is a mystery, right? Where in the universe did you grow up if nobody praised your level of skill?" Elma said.

"Maybe a place where there wasn't much fighting?" I suggested.

"I dunno where that would be. We elves live mostly traditional lives, but everyone knows how to use laser guns."

"That's heart-crushing." Elves living deep in the forest while carrying around sci-fi weaponry kind of killed the aesthetic. Or maybe it just made them cooler in a weird, roundabout way?

“Wait, what were you imagining elves were like?” Elma stared, but I just shrugged. Her traditional elves might ruin my love of fantasy; I really didn’t want to know.

“Mimi, how about some more training?” I said, trying to change the topic.

“Sure. I’ll do my best!”

“Don’t push yourself, now.” I had to chuckle at Mimi’s fist clenching and heavy breathing. She was just so determined. I was glad to see it. She’d be a lot safer if she could defend herself from now on.

We spent the whole day teaching her how to take down multiple targets, how to use cover effectively for protection, and how to maneuver in a gun fight.

“My arms are aching…” Mimi said later, exhausted.

“Warm yourself up in the bath and get in the medical pod,” Elma suggested. “It’ll get better, trust me.”

“Mimi, how about we add some strength work to your training regimen?” I said.

“H-Hmm… I don’t want to be bulky.” Mimi’s face clouded over at my suggestion.

“Y’know, putting on some muscle makes it harder to get fat,” I said.

“I’ll do my best!” Her attitude changed in the blink of an eye. It was startling how quickly she could change her mind about something. Cute, but also maybe a little troubling. Eh, whatever. It wasn’t my place to rain on her parade.

After that, Mimi started putting a little extra oomph into her after-meal training.

Afterword

THANK YOU for purchasing Volume 1 of *Reborn as a Space Mercenary*, originally titled *When I Woke Up, I Got the Strongest Equipment and a Spaceship, So I Went and Became a Mercenary in Order to Live as I Please While Aiming for a Detached House*. I must say, that's one heck of a long title!

Nice to meet you! I'm Ryuto. Think of me as a little bear living in Hokkaido. For those of you who know me already, it's great to see you again!

To be honest, I'm a fan of *soft* science fiction. As for how soft, well…honestly, I just can't get myself to try out the classics of science fiction. Yep.

Argh, stop! Don't throw rocks at me!

I first got into science fiction thanks to video games. There are so many kinds of games that use sci-fi concepts like robots, mecha, cyberspace, and outer space. These are the things that men dream of!

Lately, I've been into the sci-fi strategy game *Stellaris* and the spaceflight simulator *Elite Dangerous*.

Modern games have such beautiful graphics that, despite not being able to truly go to space, I feel as though I can navigate the vast sea of stars myself. It's more than enough to make my fantasies go wild over the mysterious beauty of space.

If you're wondering what I'm getting at, basically, you all should play some sci-fi games! Space is incredible! That's all.

Honestly, though. Seeing asteroid belts and stars from different distances, accidentally getting too close, and almost dying is wonderful fun. I mean it.

Though I really need to stay away from pulsars. Pulsars scare me to death.

Anyway, I guess I should start talking about the book, right? Let's do that.

…If you can't tell, I'm really bad at afterwords! What am I supposed to write here?!

How about talking about aspects of the setting that I couldn't get into during the story itself? I think that's a good idea. Unfortunately, I think talking about the technology in this story would take up too much space, so let's talk about Oishii Mart, which came up in the story.

Oishii Mart is a mega-corporation with shops all over the galaxy, offering all kinds of foods from the cheapest to the most exquisite. It dates back to before humanity even first struck out into space, according to some sources.

The corporation's home office is shrouded in mystery; even seeing permanent employees of it is a rarity. That said, we (probably) won't be pursuing that mystery much in the main series. At least, that's not my plan at the moment. Yeah.

Sorry to change the subject, but GC Novels is now selling *Survival in Another World with My Master*. That's another one of my works, so I'd be delighted if you would give that a read as well!

I want to tell you so much more! But for now, I think it would be best to leave it at that.

I offer my sincere thanks to A for giving me this opportunity; K, my manager; Tetsuhiro Nabeshima, our illustrator; and everyone involved in the publication of this book. And that goes to you too for buying this book. Thank you!

Let's meet again in the next volume!

—RYUTO

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ryuto

A brown bear living in Hokkaido.

My hobby is gaming. I have a wide range of tastes, but survival action and strategy games are my absolute favorites. I changed the carpet in my living room recently. It’s wonderful to bask in the sun with my dog. Shaking things up is nice once in a while.

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